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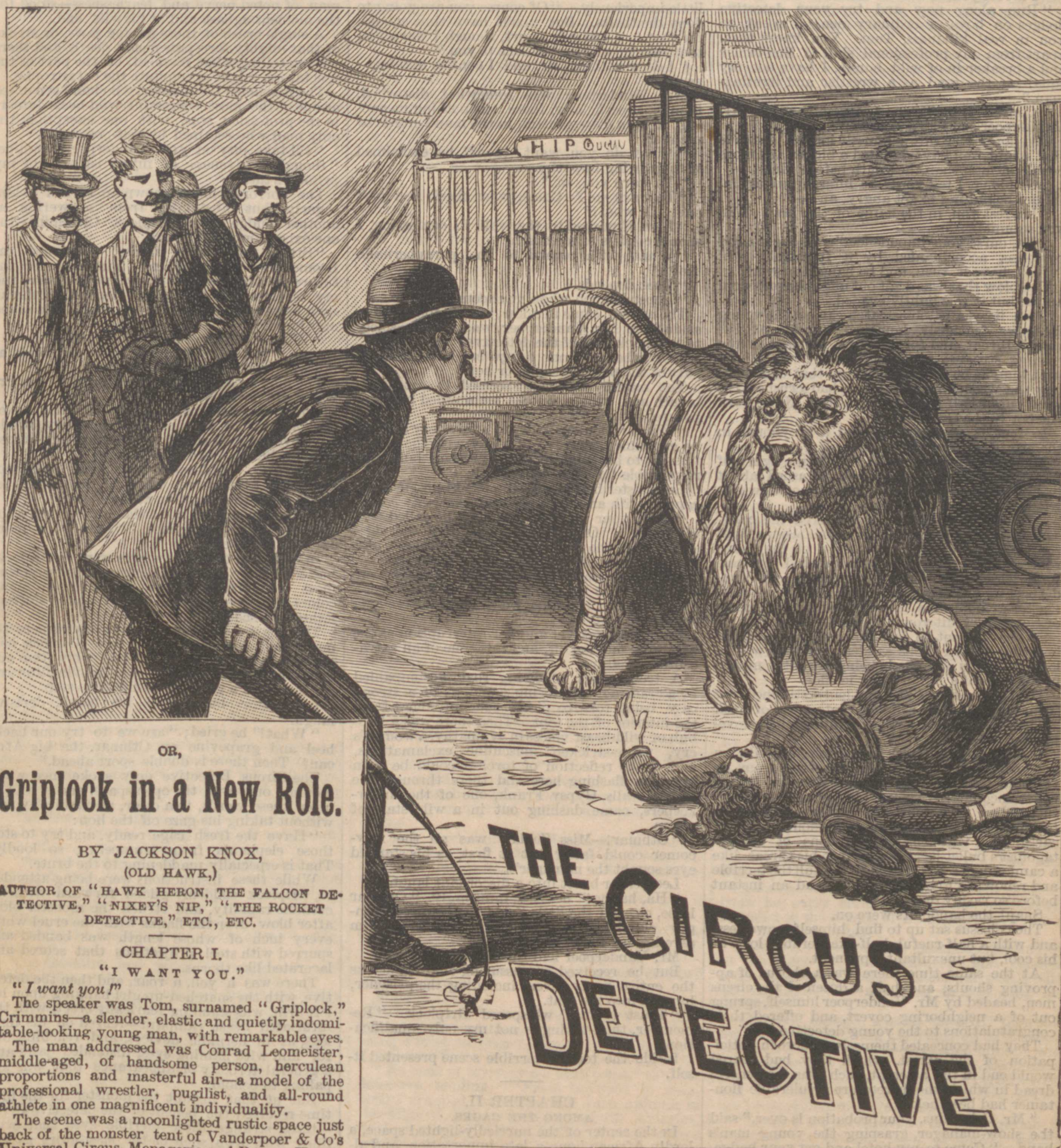
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OR,
Griplock in a New Role.

BY JACKSON KNOX,
(OLD HAWK.)

AUTHOR OF "HAWK HERON, THE FALCON DETECTIVE," "NIXEY'S NIP," "THE ROCKET DETECTIVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"I WANT YOU."

"I want you!"

The speaker was Tom, surnamed "Griplock," Crimmins—a slender, elastic and quietly indomitable-looking young man, with remarkable eyes. The man addressed was Conrad Leomeister, middle-aged, of handsome person, herculean proportions and masterful air—a model of the professional wrestler, pugilist, and all-round athlete in one magnificent individuality.

The scene was a moonlighted rustic space just back of the monster tent of Vanderpoer & Co's Universal Circus, Menagerie and Roman Hippodrome on the outskirts of a large interior town.

GRIPLOCK HAD SNATCHED A HEAVY, STEEL-STIFFENED WHIP FROM ONE OF THE UNDER-KEEPERS, AND WAS MOVING TOWARD THE LION WITH A GLIDING AND NOISELESS STEP.

The performance had been over for several hours.

The silence of night was only broken by an occasional growl or yawn from the neighboring animal-cages, the snorting of horses, or detached sounds of revelry from one or another of the adjacent drinking saloons.

"I want you!"

This in a quietly ominous tone, accompanied by the professional touch of the speaker's right hand on the giant's shoulder, and the jingling of a pair of handcuffs in the left.

It was all so significant that Leomeister, surprised though he had been, could not or would not pretend the bewilderment usual in a man when suddenly placed under arrest.

"Oho! you want me, do you?" he exclaimed, bursting into a contemptuous laugh. "But look you, young fellow," this with a commiserating look, "do you realize that you'll have to fight for me?"

The handcuffs were out of sight in an instant, the young man's face became as of iron, and his extraordinary eyes contracted, like those of the jungle monarch when about to spring.

"Now I do," said he, with a single comprehensive glance that inventoried every possibility of the superb personality before him.

Leomeister laughed even more unpleasantly than before.

"Pshaw! Crimmins, you forget the disparity between us," said he, with a pitying shrug of his immense shoulders. "You would but rush upon your fate."

"I arrest you, and—"

"Run along now and try your detective dodges on boys, or ordinary men. I speak to you in real kindness, Tom. You know that, apart from my professional skill as lion-tamer and a breaker-in of wild horses, I have not my equal on the road as a wrestler and fighting-man."

"Conrad Leomeister, I arrest you, on Mr. Vanderpoer's authority, and—"

The lion-tamer threw himself into an attitude that might well have daunted a bigger and more confident man than the youth before him.

"Go along, I tell you!" he interrupted again. "I am beginning to get angry, and—"

"I arrest you, in the name of the law! Will you submit?"

"No, curse your impudence!" was the roared response, accompanied by a frightful oath. "Well, have it, then, and be hanged to you!"

The blow that was dealt out might have felled an ox, but it was lightly evaded.

Then it was catch-as-catch-can as the young detective fearlessly launched himself at the giant's throat, and for the first moment of the ensuing struggle it seemed that it was all up with him, as he was enveloped in that enormous hug and wrenching grasp that had crushed the wind out of half the wrestlers from New York Harbor to the Golden Gate.

In fact, it at first suggested a greyhound in the hug of a grizzly bear.

The comparatively slight and fragile figure of the detective was lashed and thrashed about like an effigy of straw at the sport of a whirlwind.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!" roared the colossus. "What! you would try conclusions with the great Leomeister, the terror of the show-roules? Boy! where is the vaunted prowess with which you have hoodwinked old Vanderpoer and his trusting crew? Where, in this master-grip of mine, is the fabled griplock some of the fools credit you with, and— Ugh!"

At that instant he felt and recognized it, the boasting vociferations suddenly ending with a loud grunt, as of a whale being abruptly nipped in the jaws of a Baffin's Bay ice-floe.

The slender figure had suddenly stiffened out in his grasp as if transformed into a bar of steel.

Then there was a series of lightning-like movements.

The giant's bull-neck was encircled with an anaconda-grip, his left leg was torn from its foothold by such a grapevine twist as it had never encountered before, his right received and succumbed to a masterly heel-tap, and, as he tottered over with a crash—both shoulders biting earth, and with the frontal bone of his antagonist's bullet-head boring into his throat like a cannon-ball—be realized to the full the terrible and renowned griplock that he had an instant before so rashly despised.

Snap! the handcuffs were on.

The colossus sat up to find himself powerless, and with a half-rueful, half-exasperated look at his cool, but unexultant, opponent.

At the same time there was a chorus of approving shouts, and half a dozen of the circus men, headed by Mr. Vanderpoer himself, sprung out of a neighboring covert, and offered their congratulations to the young detective.

They had concealed themselves there in anticipation of the arrest, which they had feared would end in the attempt, such was the general dread in which the theretofore invulnerable lion-tamer had been held.

"Mr. Crimmins, your probation is over," said the show-manager, grasping the young man's hand. "Come to my hotel and get your badge. Your right to your sobriquet, Griplock Crimmins, is indisputable."

The circus men had by this time laid hold of Leomeister, who had slowly risen to his feet, and seemed to submit to his defeat with sullen resignation.

"That is so!" cried one of them. "No more secret plundering of the properties, with such a watch-dog to guard 'em. Three cheers for Griplock Crimmins, the Circus Detective!"

The cheers were given with a will by all but one man.

This was John Vincent, better known as Center-pole Jack, a powerful, beetle-browed and secretive-looking man, who had participated in the after-scene in dutiful silence, but without a particle of his companion's enthusiasm.

There seemed nothing strange in this, however, since Center-pele Jack was known as an English Gypsy of unaccountable moods, and no little mystery, besides being a useful, hard-working man, thoroughly conversant with the tenting business.

"Keep that man under guard until the proper authorities can take him in custody," said Mr. Vanderpoer, sternly pointing to the handcuffed man. "Griplock," to the detective, "come with me. My daughter, Zelda, shall not be the last one to thank you for this arrest."

"Wait!"

It was the defeated wrestler who spoke.

As the proprietor and the detective turned, he shook off the detaining hands, and advanced a step toward them, his manacled hands drooping helplessly before him, but with a sort of commanding majesty in his mien.

"What is it?" demanded Mr. Vanderpoer, a little imperiously. "Of course you are going to deny the thefts. But you'll have time enough for that in a justice's court, though I warn you that they'll be brought home to you."

"I deny nothing, sir, and I confess nothing—as yet!"

Mr. Vanderpoer was somewhat disturbed, though, superficially, there was nothing menacing, or even disrespectful, in the man's words or manner.

"What do you want, then?" he exclaimed with growing impatience.

"To warn you, sir."

"To warn me? Come, your cheek is a good one! Of what?"

"Lest, if pushed to the wall, in confessing, I should confess to too much."

"What! with regard to the paraphernalia thefts?"

"That depends."

"Depends upon what, you scoundrel?"

The answer came in a low, hissing tone which, aside from Mr. Vanderpoer, was audible solely to the quick ears of the detective.

"Or whether your daughter, Miss Zelda, is part of the paraphernalia or not."

The master showman seemed to catch his breath and whiten, but he maintained his composure.

"What ridiculous attempt at mystery is this?" he exclaimed, sternly. "Away with the man!" turning to his subordinates; "I shall hold you responsible for his security."

Leomeister had again submitted himself to his captors with an easy and indifferent air.

"Have your will with me, sir!" he called out, carelessly. "Only don't forget that the side-show, with the Mermaid, the Man-Snake, and Purring Pedro, is mine by special contract."

"I forget nothing," said Mr. Vanderpoer, angrily. "As for the contract, we'll see about that. Come, Crimmins, we've loitered here long enough."

But there was yet another interruption as the pair were moving off, and this time of an extraordinary nature.

A tremendous bellowing roar, accompanied by a crashing, splintering sound, as of a strong cage being torn to pieces, suddenly burst from the interior of the tent. Then there was a hubbub of wild-beast voices in sympathy, a woman's cry, panic-stricken masculine exclamations, and, as the reflection of torches could be seen hurriedly flashing here and there through the canvas walls, Gypsy Frank, one of the under-keepers, came dashing out in a wild state of alarm.

"Othmar!—Miss Zelda!" was all the newcomer could falter out at first, as his startled eyes sought the manager's.

Leomeister burst into a discordant laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he cried, tauntingly. "Othmar loose, eh, and the little Zelda herself in his hungry clutch? Well, well; who will cage him afresh, now that I am in the toils?"

Mr. Vanderpoer had turned livid.

But he received a reassuring elbow-touch as the entire party, even including the prisoner, hurried into the tent.

"Trust in me," whispered Griplock. "Remember, thief-taking is not my only qualification."

Inside the tent, a terrible scene presented itself.

CHAPTER II.

AMONG THE CAGES.

IN the center of the hurriedly-lighted space, a lordly African lion—a late importation, and almost wholly untamed—was standing with bristling mane, glowing eyes and lashing tail.

Behind him, thrown from its trestles, was the splintered and dismantled cage, from which he had just made his escape.

At his mercy—in fact, with one paw resting lightly upon her body—was the prostrate form of a terrified, but still painfully conscious young girl.

It was Zelda Vanderpoer, the loveliest performer and most taking card in the entire show business at the time of which we write.

No time to question as to the cause of the appalling situation now.

Paralyzed or fascinated, she was practically already in the ferocious monster's jaws.

Even the veteran keepers were beside themselves for the time being.

The wild inmates of the surrounding cages were voicing in the most horribly suggestive manner their anticipation of the bloody feast in prospect.

It was a show in which they, the wild beasts, had become the spectators, and in which Othmar, the king of beasts, and Zelda, the fairy princess of the equestrian arena, were the tragic performers.

It was known that the lion had been on short rations for days, in the hope of reducing his strength and breaking his exceptional savagery.

His appearance was frightful, and at this juncture he roared afresh.

The girl seemed doomed.

Like the rest, Mr. Vanderpoer stood as one petrified, and even his partner, who was present—George Isaacs, an old-time menagerie man, of noted nerve and fearlessness—stood for the moment aghast and at his wits' end.

A single crush of those gaping jaws, or stroke of that mighty fore-paw meant death, and there was no telling what moment, on the part of the spectators, might precipitate the catastrophe.

The manacled Leomeister, who had been noted as one of the most successful wild-beast-tamers in the profession, was, with one exception, the only man who retained his self-possession.

"I'll take pity on you, Vanderpoer," said he, "though forgiveness of injury isn't one of my prime virtues."

The horror-stricken showman turned to him eagerly, but abstained from answering at another nudge from Griplock Crimmins—the one exception noted above.

"Strike off these irons," continued the Leomeister, "promise me immunity for the future, besides the one thing I most desire, and my services are at your disposal. Othmar shall be recaged in short order, and Zelda saved uninjured."

"What is the one thing you demand?"

"As if you didn't know it! The girl Zelda as my wife, with or without her own consent!"

The man's passion for the beautiful creature was well-known.

Under the circumstances, the unmanliness of the proposition, in such an emergency, would have evoked a storm of reprobation from those present, but it was different now.

Even Mr. Vanderpoer was about to accept the cruel alternative, when he was again restrained by the detective at his elbow.

"Give the coward not a thought," warned the same low but strong voice. "I am your man. Look at my eyes."

In fact, the detective's eyes were worth looking at. They were dilating and contracting most wonderfully, while changing as many colors as a pair of opals in a room of shifting lights and shades.

The master-showman had barely time to remark, and wonder at this, before Griplock had snatched a heavy, steel-stiffened whip from one of the under-keepers, and was moving toward the lion with a gliding and noiseless step.

Leomeister burst into his harsh, derisive laugh.

"What!" he cried; "are we to try our back-heel and grapevine on Othmar, the big African? Then there is double sport ahead."

The Circus Detective only spoke once while moving out over the open space, and it was to utter these words, in a clear, mechanical voice, without taking his gaze off the lion:

"Have the fresh cage ready, and try to stop those elephants from trumpeting so loudly. That is especially maddening to the brute."

While these instructions were being attended to, Griplock suddenly glided forward with incredible rapidity, and struck the monster blow after blow over the flanks with the cruel whip, every inch of whose length was banded and spurred with steel projections that scored and lacerated like thorns.

There was a yell, a roar, and then the detective, with the snatched-up girl hanging upon his left arm, was standing fearlessly erect, with the infuriated beast rampant—reared on his hind legs, as in heraldic devices, and reaching out for him with flaming eyes, distended jaws and a general ferocity of appearance that was appalling to behold.

But at that instant the monster for the first time received the benefit of the detective's eyes—those strange, those terrible eyes, that even filled with awe such of the spectators as encountered them!—and he suddenly dropped upon all-fours with a sort of furious whine, as if

abruptly enveloped in a boa-constrictor's folds, and with the arched neck, flat head and deadly serpent eyes undulating between him and his certain doom.

As the detective advanced, with whip up-raised, the lion retreated, step by step, still lashing his sides with his tufted tail, but with his fiery eyes riveted by the taming and all-conquering gaze.

Step by step toward the open door of the fresh cage that had by this time been prepared for his re-incarceration, and then, as the trumpeting was renewed at the further end of the tent, there was a critical pause.

Was the monster shaking off the mastering spell, and about to make his spring at last?

"Quiet those elephants!" called out the detective again, in the same clear, dispassionate voice. "There is danger. Unless they are silenced, I can answer for nothing."

"We're trying to," called out a voice in reply. "But Big Rajah has his tantrum on him, and he makes the rest ungovernable."

Still, the elephants were once more partly quieted.

Then swish! swish! swish! descended the barbarous whip afresh, this time across the lion's face, bringing the blood in drops and streaks at every slash.

It was too much—with a dolorous whine, the conquered brute turned tail.

Then a parting cut over the flank caused him to spring into the cage for very protection, the heavy door closed upon him with a clang, and the danger was at an end.

But, not quite. Griplock Crimmins had just passed his half-fainting burden to Mr. Vanderpoer, when, amid the jargon of howls and cries still filling the air, there was an infuriated elephantine scream from the big pen at the further end.

Then there was a general scattering, as a formidable apparition came rushing out from that quarter.

Big Rajah was loose, charging down between the cages, with Mahmoud, his chief keeper, in his clutch.

As yet uninjured, but whirled aloft at the end of the animal's prehensile trunk, the poor fellow, in anticipation of being dashed to death at any instant, was bawling for assistance in a Celtic jargon that was in odd contrast with his suppositiously Arabian or Hindu extraction.

The uproar in the cages was renewed, keepers and tent-hands scattered right and left, and for the moment the colossal pachyderm, fairly dancing with rage, his small piggish eyes snapping viciously, and his great, leaf-like ears flapping the air like the sails of a windmill, was monarch of all he surveyed.

"You'll have to let Leomeister at him," called out Mr. Isaacs to Mr. Vanderpoer, across the disputed ground. "None but he has ever been able to subdue Big Rajah when on the rampage."

But, before he had ceased speaking, Griplock Crimmins had again sprung in the imminent and deadly breach.

"Be ready with the chains and foot-irons!" he called out in his cool, incisive tones. "It is only a question of nerve!"

"Of nerve, yes, but of something more," cried Leomeister, with a repetition of his rasping laugh. "If you think to try eye-power on Rajah, as you did on Othmar, my fine fellow, you will reckon without your host."

But, the detective intended to do nothing of the sort. He had already snatched up a long many-pronged, straight-tined pitchfork, such as is frequently in use in wild animal collections.

With this he charged fearlessly into the monster's front, stabbing him deeply and repeatedly as fast as he could lunge.

Big Rajah trumpeted horribly, reared once more, backed away, and then squealed entreatingly, while trembling violently.

The proboscis was lowered, Mahmoud released uninjured, the chains and foot-irons were clapped on, and then, amid the cheers of the on-lookers, the great brute was led away to fresh captivity and punishment eondign.

The first words of the genuine Oriental keeper, Mahmoud, on recovering his self-possession, were these:

"By the howly St. Patrick! it's meself that will get even wid the hulkin' b'aste for this night's deviltry, or may Oi niver see the blue waters of Cork Harbor again!"

Then, after a grateful glance at Griplock, his preserver, he dashed off in pursuit of the captive elephant.

The detective had, naturally enough, at once become the center of an admiring circle.

"Griplock," said Showman Isaacs, cordially grasping his hand, "you have proved yourself a brave and invaluable man. We can employ you far more profitably than as our detective officer, if you only say the word."

"Many thanks, Mr. Isaacs," was the quiet reply, "but detective work, pure and simple, is good enough for me."

And he followed Mr. Vanderpoer, who, with Zelda on his arm, had genially beckoned to him while passing out of the tent.

Leomeister, still shackled and under guard, looked at him steadily and scowled as he passed.

"Griplock is a good fighting name," said he, in a low, significant voice. "But every dog has his day."

"Right you are, Conrad," said the detective, smiling. "And you might add that every dog has its dog-master."

As he was issuing from the tent, he caught another malevolent glance leveled at him before its owner, Centre-pole Jack, could withdraw or disguise it.

"So," thought the detective, pursuing his way. "I suspected that you were secretly hand-in-glove with that scoundrel, Leomeister, and now I am sure of it."

Arriving at Mr. Vanderpoer's hotel, he found that gentleman eagerly awaiting him in the comparatively sumptuous apartments occupied by Miss Zelda and himself.

"Be seated, and ever welcome, my dear fellow," was the show-proprietor's cordial greeting. "Have a glass of wine with me at once, and my daughter will join us presently. Gaston, have you finished the reports and advertisements?"

Gaston, a very dark, slender and effeminate-looking individual, with a delicate black mustache and restless black eyes, was both the show press-agent and Mr. Vanderpoer's private secretary.

"Yes, sir," said he, rising from his table and folding up some pages of writing on which he had been engaged. "Everything is in readiness for the three newspapers published in this town."

"Be off with you, then!" cried Mr. Vanderpoer, good-humoredly. "Let to-night's adventures blossom out to-morrow in all the glory of display head-lines."

"Ah, Crimmins," he added, rubbing his hands as the secretary disappeared, "much as I am beholden to you, and hero as you have been, there is nothing like a little self-glorification in the show business. Advertise, man, advertise! That is the secret of success, with a good show or a bad one."

The detective was already seated, and he smiled as he touched glasses and sipped his wine.

"And ours happens to be a good one," he added.

"Tiptop! But then one can't seize hold of too many dodges to freshen curiosity in the performances, and the picturesque perils of this evening will turn out to have been a god-send. Gad! for the remainder of our week here there won't be standing room in the tents, and the exchanges will spread the romance of the thing all over the country. Those seeming disasters will put Isaacs and me in pocket more than twenty thousand dollars before the end of the tenting season. But of course you are the big toad in the puddle throughout. Gaston has the facts to prime the reports with. Just wait to see how you will blossom out in to-morrow's prints."

"It is a notoriety that I could willingly dispense with," said Crimmins, thoughtfully.

As Mr. Vanderpoer did not at once pursue his exuberant vein, he looked up to perceive the showman studying him with a puzzled expression.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHOWMASTER'S SECRET.

"You are a good deal of a mystery, Griplock," said Mr. Vanderpoer.

"In what way?"

"Gad! in every way. You came to us only a fortnight ago, from the Lord and yourself alone know where, seeking the vacant position of detective for our show."

The young man nodded. The secret of his antecedents was evidently one that he intended to confine to the Lord and himself.

"Then you marvelously make good every qualification you have claimed for yourself—Gad! and more, too, for that matter. By the way, here is your badge."

He handed out from a drawer a silver badge, bearing the show-firm's monogram and an appropriate inscription, which was gravely accepted.

"And I presume," continued the showman, "that a salary of fifteen hundred a year, exclusive of incidental expenses, will be satisfactory?"

The young man nodded his assent—he was a man of few words, at the best.

"It's five hundred more than we gave to Sligo Nugent, your predecessor," continued Mr. Vanderpoer, "the devil fly away with him!—but you are well worth the difference, and are welcome to it."

Another nod.

"Then, again," the showman went on, pursuing his original theme, "here you are developing a fresh surprise for us, in the animal-taming powers that you have exhibited to-night."

"No need of mystery on that point," said the detective, smiling. "From boyhood to manhood I trapped ferocious and rare animals in the wilds of Asia, Africa and South America, in the service of Reiche & Co., the well-known wild beast importers."

"The deuce you say! and thanks for the confidence. Then here you are risking your life by

bearding Othmar, our worst lion, all for the sake of my pretty daughter, Zelda, whom you have never seen, save in her professional character, or perhaps exchanged a single word with in your life. But more upon that subject presently. Truly, you are a good deal of a mystery, Griplock."

The detective smiled oddly.

At this moment Mr. Vanderpoer was called out of the room by the private secretary, who had just returned, and during his brief absence Zelda herself entered.

She was a ravishingly beautiful brunette of nineteen.

That was a strange misconception of facts which the showman had last expressed.

The young girl and the Circus Detective were no sooner aware of their being alone together than they were in each other's arms.

The exchange of a grateful and a passionate look, a swift kiss, and that was all.

"Have you discovered the secret of my past history from him?" whispered the girl.

"Not yet. He will probably broach the subject; if not, I shall prompt him to do so."

"That will be well. Remember how much depends on our knowing the mystery."

"I do not forget. You are fully recovered from your fright?"

"Yes."

"How did you happen among the cages at that time of night?"

"I have explained it all to papa."

"Explain it to me."

"I was troubled about that sore on Black Sultan's forefoot, which had twice almost tripped him during my bare-back act."

"Yes."

"Well, I couldn't resist the temptation of running over to the tent, to see if it had been attended to in his grooming. Neither papa nor Gaston was here, so I went alone. After looking the horse over, I was passing among the animals, when I noticed that Othmar's cage seemed insecure, while he was uncommonly restless. I had just called some of the men's attention to the fact, when, with a sudden bound, the brute broke through. But I did not wholly lose my presence of mind, even when at his mercy."

"Don't I know that without the telling? My brave Zelda!"

"Hush! I think papa must be returning. Don't forget."

"Depend on me. But wait; does any one else know the secret of your past?"

"Yes; Leomeister—at least, I fear so. Ah, that terrible man! Should poor papa chance to die without explaining, or should Leomeister get me in his power—but, hush!"

At this juncture Mr. Vanderpoer returned.

His brow was troubled, though it almost instantly cleared as he perceived the young persons together.

"Aha! struck up an acquaintance already, eh?" said he, rubbing his hands. "That is well. But gratitude is often a dangerous sentiment, however deserved, when evinced by youth and beauty to manhood and good looks. No compliment intended you, Griplock. Zelda, my dear, fill the wine-glasses, and seat yourself. Capital Tokay, this! My dears, here's looking toward both of you. Ah, that rascal Leomeister! He's a deep one—as deep as he is dangerous. Trouble, trouble, trouble!"

He shook his head dubiously, even while sipping his wine.

Zelda, after setting down her glass untasted, was moving fitfully about the room.

"May I ask as to the nature of any fresh trouble in that quarter?" said Griplock, diffidently.

"He's in the town lock-up, but I sha'n't be able to hold him. But more, presently. Zelda, my dear, you ought to be thoroughly exhausted by your experience of this evening."

"Yes, papa; and I shall retire, with your permission. Good-night."

She kissed him, and then, Gaston, the secretary, returning at that moment, she extended her hand to him.

An odd, shy, pale, silent, effeminate-looking and somewhat mysterious fellow, this same slender private secretary, Gaston Larue, who had been with Mr. Vanderpoer for many years.

Zelda had known him in his present capacity from her early childhood, and he was always included to the extent of a hand-pressure in her good-night amenities.

Then, with a becomingly ceremonious courtesy to the detective, she withdrew, and Gaston, after exchanging some confidential words with his employer, was not long in following her example.

"Trouble enough, trouble enough!" then said the showman, drawing his chair up to the table at which the detective had reseated himself, and refilling the tiny glasses. "You see, Leomeister has got the deadwood on me in a certain way, and I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to hold him on the property-room theft charges."

"It cost me some drops of perspiration in effecting his arrest," said Griplock, significantly.

"I know that, my boy. Gad! didn't I witness it all? And a beautifully neat job, into

the bargain! But you see—" Mr. Vanderpoer hesitated, and then fell to reflecting silently.

"I suppose there is no doubt as to his guilt, sir?"

"Not the slightest. And he is not the only one implicated, either; I am satisfied of that. He must have had confederates."

"Subordinate rascals! Little doubt of that. I could offer a shrewd guess as to their names."

"You could?"

"Yes."

"Name them, then. It shall be strictly confidential."

"Center-pole Jack, for one."

Mr. Vanderpoer knitted his brows.

"The big Gypsy!" said he. "The most efficient tent-hand in our employ!"

"But secretly hand-in-glove with Conrad, and a man not the less dangerous because useful and unobtrusive. I have watched and studied him closely."

"You may be right. Whom else?"

"Gogo, the Man-Snake."

"Ha!"

"Yes; the monstrosity is equally serpent-like in soul and body. There is not a bidding of Leomeister's that he wouldn't crawl and wriggle toward accomplishing."

"So. Any more?"

"One more. Kalulah, the Mermaid, or Girl-Fish."

"But she seems both pretty and amiable."

"A hypocrite—foul, absolute and deadly!"

"Good, then; we must be on extra guard. But," and here the showman burst into a good-natured laugh, "I say, Crimmins?"

"What is it, Mr. Vanderpoer?"

"Couldn't you manage to include Purring Pedro in the list?"

The detective also laughed.

"Well, Conrad's dancing bear is a thief, no less than a drunkard, for that matter," said he.

"But why do you fear that you can't hold his master on charges preferred against him?"

"Gaston has just been interviewing him in jail. The fellow insists on his contract rights to the side-show."

"But, what do the trio of curiosities amount to? Miss Zelda alone, in the main show, is a better card than all of them put together."

"True. But there are Leomeister's animal-taming powers. You might not always be on hand in an emergency like this evening's."

"Mr. Vanderpoer, I would not let this scoundrel off, now that you have got him in the toils."

"I wouldn't do so willingly."

"May I be outspoken?"

"Perfectly so."

"Confess, then, that there is a weightier reason for your fearing to prosecute him."

The showman started.

"To what could any weightier reason refer?"

"To Zelda's past history."

"Ha!"

"Yes. I alone overheard Leomeister's significantly menacing words to you, directly following his arrest."

"I didn't know that."

"Be frank with me, then. Besides, it is sufficiently known that the young lady is not your own daughter."

The show-master reflected; and then he drew a long breath.

"I will be frank with you—that is, as frank as I dare," said he. "In the first place, Leomeister cherishes a dangerous passion for the young girl. He is crazy to marry her."

"That goes without saying, after what has passed. But he never shall—the young lady shall be invincibly protected against his pursuit—so long as I can raise a hand or heel."

"You!"

"Yes."

"But you have just made her acquaintance."

"Nevertheless, I regard her as an angel in mortal seeming—an angel to be worshiped from afar, and to be protected against such a scoundrel as Leomeister at any cost."

"And you would defend her?"

"With my life! In case of anything happening to you, I would defend her as I would an idolized—sister."

Mr. Vanderpoer was greatly moved. He grasped the detective's hand.

"Listen," said he. "Rumor is right; Zelda is not my own daughter, though she will be my heir to such fortune as I may leave; for, contrary to the general belief, I am not now a rich man. I first saw the girl, when she was but five years old, in Algiers."

"In Algiers?"

"Yes. She was with a colony of French gamblers and criminals there. Her surroundings were simply frightful. Her father, or the man calling himself so, was one of their leaders. There was one among them, though—a German adventurer, young, of fine address, speaking many languages fluently—who was their master-spirit in crime and daring. This man was Conrad Leomeister."

"The lion-tamer?"

"The same, though then under another name."

"But—"

"You shall know all, or, at least, as much as I dare tell you. The child was with her reputed

mother, her reputed father's wife, a sad and suffering young woman, who loved it dearly, and who bitterly felt the disgrace of her position; for it was a crew of regular saarks, looked down upon by all self-respecting persons, native as well as foreign, and in almost constant difficulty with the authorities. My wife had died shortly before, not long after we had buried our only child, a lovely little girl of about the little Zelda's age, and not unlike her in the style of her dark beauty, and I was alone in the world. Business relations with Leomeister brought me in frequent contact with the gang, for then, as now, he was something of an animal-tamer, and I was securing some lions for an Antwerp firm, and he was enabled to assist me in my negotiations with the native hunters. My heart yearned toward the child from the first, and the woman saw it. She and her rascally husband were named Planchez. On the eve of my departure for Europe, the husband was desperately wounded in a gambling broil, in which Leomeister had also been concerned. The woman secretly came to me, with the child, saying: 'Planchez is dying, and this is no place for the little angel. She might grow up corrupted, whereas now she is pure as a *fleur de lis*. I see that you love her, and will care for her future. Take her. She is yours. I give her to you.' Then she placed a package of papers in my hands. 'Zelda is not our child, as perhaps you have divined,' she continued. 'Planchez, to gratify an old grudge, stole her from her parents when an infant. I have since come to adore her, but sacrifice my feelings to her happiness. She is of noble blood, and the heiress to immense wealth in France. These papers are the certificates of her true parentage and of her identity. Swear to me that you will not divulge the nature of their contents until she shall have come of age—danger and trouble might otherwise arise—and she is yours.' 'Surprised and gratified, I took the required oath, and the woman, stifling a sob at the sacrifice she was making, disappeared before I could question her. I lost no time in quitting the country with my precious acquisition. She has been the joy of my life from that hour.'

"And the knowledge of this constitutes Conrad Leomeister's power over you?"

Mr. Vanderpoer winced a little, but answered in the affirmative.

"Yes," said he, "Leomeister pretends to believe that the Planchez man and woman were really Zelda's parents. He knows that both she and I would feel disgraced at having such antecedents publicly ascribed to her."

"I understand. Am I at liberty to question you freely?"

"I give you the privilege."

"First, let me ask what became of the Planchez couple?"

"I heard of them shortly after my quitting Algiers through Gaston Larue, who then first came into my employ. He had lived there, and knew something of the couple and their associates. Planchez had died of his wounds soon after my departure. The woman had then mysteriously disappeared, none knew whither."

"So; and Miss Zelda has been kept ignorant of the contents of those papers?"

"Entirely so: in accordance with my oath. She shall know all when she is twenty-one—two years hence."

"But you have examined the papers?"

"Yes; and they are genuine. They will place her in a magnificent social position."

"Far better than that of a circus-rider, eh?"

The showman flushed.

"Zelda is a professional by choice—by natural and uncontrollable impulse, I may say. I would have preferred another career for her, but she was persistent, and her pleasure is my delight."

As the detective remained silent, Mr. Vanderpoer abruptly exclaimed, after a reflective pause:

"Crimmins, I am going to trust you with the secret of those papers soon, say to-morrow. Something *might* happen to me, and then Zelda would be like a boat at sea without a compass. Come with me."

He led the detective into an adjoining bedroom of the hotel suite he occupied, and, opening one of his trunks, displayed a flat, carved silver casket, bearing a crest, with the monogram initials P. C. V., elegantly embossed.

"That casket," said he, "contains the title-deeds to Zelda's name, lineage, and true position in the world. To-morrow they shall be submitted to your inspection; you shall share the momentous secret with me."

"Why not now? There is no securer time than the present."

Mr. Vanderpoer hesitated, and then hastily closed the trunk.

"No, I believe not," said he. "To-morrow will be time enough. It is late. Good-night."

To-morrow, and still to-morrow!

Procrastination may be no less fatal than unfortunate.

At an early hour on the following morning, the Circus Detective, who occupied an humble apartment in the same hotel, was awakened by an excited servant, who informed him that something was wrong in the Vanderpoer suite. Hastening thither, he found everything in

confusion, the rooms full of terrified faces, and Zelda almost beside herself with horror.

Mr. Isaacs, together with many of the show-people, had already been summoned to the place.

"What has happened?" demanded the detective.

Zelda sprung toward him, with clasped hands and a face like marble.

"Oh!" she wailed; "everything has happened. Poor papa—Mr. Vanderpoer—is dead—murdered!"

CHAPTER IV. LIVING CURIOSITIES.

MURDERED!

As soon as Griplock could master his amazement, he placed the young girl in charge of two of the circus women who were present, and then stepped into the adjoining bedroom.

Mr. Isaacs and several others, very pale, were already there.

Mr. Vanderpoer had been stabbed to death.

The body lay on the bed, undressed, and was quite cold.

There were some signs of a slight resistance having been offered to the assassin; but the single knife-thrust was directly through the heart, it might have been delivered while the victim was asleep, and in any case death would have ensued almost instantaneously.

No weapon was visible.

The lifeless form was slightly contorted, and the features wore a frown.

Every one turned to the detective in a sort of eager inquiry, as if some sort of relief or explanation were to be found in his presence alone.

Griplock threw a swift glance of examination around the room.

To all appearances, robbery had not instigated the foul deed.

Not one of the dead man's trunks seemed to have been disturbed; his expensive watch and chain were suspended from a nail beside the couch, where he had doubtless placed them before retiring.

"When was this first discovered?" was the detective's first question.

It was Mr. Isaacs who answered: "Less than half-an-hour ago."

"By whom?"

"By Zelda. He had promised her an early-morning drive through the suburbs, and on coming to waken him she encountered this pitiable sight. Her screams aroused the hotel, and we were notified pell-mell, at hap-hazard, where-soever we could be reached. My hotel chancing to be across the way, and the fact of my being an early riser, brought me among the first."

"Is Leomeister still in jail?"

"Yes. My suspicions fastened upon him, as yours have done, instantly, and I hurried to the town lock-up, which is just around the corner. I found him, not only under bolt and bar, but sound asleep."

The detective's face did not betray his disappointment.

He requested the others to quit the room, and then sketched for Mr. Isaacs the interview he had had with Mr. Vanderpoer on the preceding night.

Mr. Isaacs, who had long been a business partner and intimate friend of the murdered man, was deeply impressed by what he heard.

"No general robbery seems to have been attempted," said he. "But let us see if the important casket you speak of is still in its place."

"That is the trunk," said Griplock, indicating the only one that had been left unlocked.

It was opened. The casket containing the papers was missing.

"I feared as much," said the detective; "with the exception of the assassin, I am probably the last person that saw the unfortunate gentleman alive. The title-deeds to Zelda's name and fortune are in the hands of the murderer."

"You still suspect Leomeister to have been concerned in this crime?"

"Undoubtedly. Can you help sharing my suspicion, in view of what I have told you of the girl's history, the lion-tamer's antecedents, and his known passion for her?"

"It looks that way."

"Apart from his resentment against Mr. Vanderpoer, by reason of the latter's recent charges against him, who would have been more likely to covet the possession of those papers than he?"

"True."

"What hopes might not such an unprincipled rascal build on in their possession? The secret of Zelda's rightful name, inheritance and social position would thenceforth hold her at his mercy—or, at least, he would argue as much."

"True, true; but let us not forget that he has been in prison since an early hour last night."

"That is to be proved. He might have effected a temporary escape long enough to have committed the murder—a scheme whose boldness and cunning Leomeister is one of the few men capable of."

The veteran showman shook his head.

"Very improbable," said he.

"But not impossible. Well, then, he has confederates, who are the slaves of his will-power. That Center-pole Jack, the Gypsy, is one of these I am assured; though I scarcely believe him capable of a midnight assassination. But Gogo, the Man-Snake, can crawl through anything short of a key-hole, while Kalulah is as stealthy and deadly as a pet panther. These are mere instances of Leomeister's resources."

Mr. Isaacs pondered for a moment.

"I shall do anything you advise, Crimmins," said he at last. "What do you propose?"

"That nothing be said about the missing casket, at least for the present."

"There's wisdom in that. Agreed."

"Then, that you transfer Zelda to your wife's protection without a moment's delay."

"Of course. It would be horrible for her to remain here."

"Then when the city authorities take charge of the case, I shall act altogether independently of them?"

"Certainly."

"I suppose I am to continue in my position with the show?"

"If you only will."

"Are the performances to be interrupted?"

"They cannot be, notwithstanding this tragic event. We are booked at this place for morning and afternoon exhibitions for the remainder of the week, and our engagements elsewhere do not admit cancellation, even were I ever so much inclined that way. The death of my old partner is a personal bereavement; he was my friend, no less than my honored business associate. But a traveling tent-show is not like a theater, which can be closed on short notice in an emergency of this sort. Perhaps you understand this."

"I do understand it. But of course Zelda cannot perform again in a long time."

"She shall never perform again, if such should be her wish. Her home shall be with my wife and daughters, with whom she has long been a beloved favorite."

Griplock Crimmins impulsively pressed the speaker's hand.

"Besides," continued Mr. Isaacs, "as I shall probably be named as the young lady's guardian in my poor old friend's will, it will be all the better for her to become one of my family at once."

"In my independent course in tracking down the author of this foul deed, I shall require to see Zelda often."

The showman bowed his head, but at the same time looked surprised.

"But you are personally well-acquainted with the young girl?" he asked.

"We have known each other far longer than is supposed," said the detective admissively. "In fact, I am here in your employ chiefly with the object of protecting her."

"Did Vanderpoer know of this?"

"No; he would have been informed of it, with full particulars, to-day, in exchange for an important confidence that he was to repose in me."

"May I ask of what nature?"

"Certainly, Mr. Isaacs. He was to share with me the secret of those missing papers—the secret of Zelda's rightful name and inheritance. I pressed him, in view of the uncertainty of future affairs, to make no delay. But no; he hesitated and put it off till the morrow; the morrow, alas! which was destined to never rise for him. Zelda's secret can now be known solely to her adoptive father's murderer."

Here there was a knock at the door, and, as they passed out of the fatal chamber, several municipal policemen and the coroner entered to take charge of the premises.

Zelda was still wild with grief, notwithstanding the efforts of the circus-women, aided by those of Gaston Larue, to comfort her.

It was a piteous sight, deeply affecting to every one in the crowded parlor.

As Mr. Isaacs, with kindly firmness of manner, was taking the weeping girl in charge, a remarkable-looking individual wound his way—one might better say twined his way—through the crowd.

It was Gogo, the Man-Snake of Leomeister's side-show, looking in his civilized garb less loathsomely characteristic than in his skin-tight professional costume, though still sufficiently so in all conscience; and he was followed by Kalulah, the Girl-Fish of the same combination, who was scarcely less noticeable, though in a different way.

They made directly for the Circus Detective.

"Oh, Mr. Crimmins! but isn't this just too awfully horrible?" exclaimed Gogo. "We are from a visit to Mr. Leomeister, who had just heard of it through his jailer, and he wants the full particulars."

His words were like a prolonged and articulated hiss. They were accompanied by a suggestive play of the red tongue between the thin, slit-like lips and glittering white teeth, the saw-like edges of which could just be seen by glimpses.

For the rest, Gogo's nose was flatter than a Guinea negro's; his cheek-bones an exaggeration of Mongolian height and breadth; forehead there was none; eyes small, glittering and green; neck

preposterously long and slender; body long, sinuous, and writhing-like in its every movement; a skin like greenish-yellow parchment; and yet was he keen and shrewd intellectually, which is not often the case with living curiosities.

"There are no particulars yet," replied the detective, gruffly. "How comes it that you were visiting your master at this early hour, Gogo?"

Gogo twined his hands and wrists over one another, with a fresh play of his scarlet tongue as he smiled demurely.

"We would never abandon our dear Mr. Leomeister in his misfortune," he hissed. "We are not of that sort, are we, Miss Kalulah?"

The Girl-Fish, who could smoke cigarettes or munch bonbons under water with professional nonchalance, was a shapely blonde young woman, whose features would have been more than comely, save for a lack-luster vacuity of expression, which, however, suggested both treachery and force of character on occasion.

"No, indeed," said she, with a little smirk. "Why, Purring Pedro would have come, too, if we had let him, Mr. Crimmins. Even as it is, he rubs his poor ears constantly, while even an extra bottle of beer fails to tempt him out of his melancholy. But isn't it just too awful, sir, about poor, good old Mr. Vanderpoer?"

Griplock left them to mingle with the crowd, and then hurried away.

An hour or two later, accompanied by Mr. Isaacs, he visited Leomeister in the jail.

"Conrad, you are free," he said. "Mr. Isaacs, it seems, did not share in the charges that were made against you, and he has brought the justice's order for your release."

The prisoner looked up, a good deal astonished, but equally on his guard; for might not this unexpected turn of affairs be, after all, a fresh trap set for him?

"It is true, Leomeister," said Mr. Isaacs. "As you are aware, poor Vanderpoer, who was chiefly instrumental in pushing the charges of theft against you, is no more, and I have no wish to pursue them. Besides, your side-show contract with the concern would hold good in any event. Come along."

Without a word the lion-tamer followed him out of the cell and out of the jail.

The Circus Detective, who had lingered behind, was no sooner alone than he began a systematic examination of the vacated cell.

When he next met Mr. Isaacs, he had an important communication to make.

CHAPTER V.

GRIPLOCK AT WORK.

THEY were seated in the showman's private room at the hotel.

"Have you discovered anything?" inquired Mr. Isaacs, eagerly.

"Yes, look."

The detective produced a shred of cloth, striped and spangled like a bright serpent's skin.

"Ha! a piece of Gogo's exhibition dress!" exclaimed Mr. Isaacs.

"Exactly."

"Whence did you obtain it?"

"From a sill-board splint in the grated window of the prison-cell occupied last night by Leomeister."

"What does the cell window look out upon?"

"On a narrow blind alley running along the lock-up wall from the main street."

"Are the bars wide apart—could Gogo have crawled through them in communicating with Conrad?"

"It would seem next to impossible. But then we all know Gogo. What is there, short of a key-hole, that he couldn't wriggle and writhe through, especially in his show-dress, and after anointing his body with his elastic oil?"

"True. Have you discovered any other clew?"

"Look again."

Griplock now produced a small red silk handkerchief, richly embroidered, but of a peculiarly glistening and slippery appearance, as though woven out of silken wool that had first been saturated in some oily preparation.

"What is that?"

"Don't you recognize it as one of Kalulah's water-performing handkerchiefs, that so surprise the spectators by floating airily about in her hand, when she is at the bottom of her glass tank, instead of becoming wet and clinging, as an ordinary handkerchief would?"

"Now I do. Yes, to be sure! And where did you get that?"

"Under the edge of the murdered man's trunk, from which the precious casket had been abstracted."

"What! this morning, when you and I were in the fatal chamber together?"

"Yes."

"You picked it up then, without my knowledge?"

"Exactly."

"But you said nothing to me."

"There was time enough when both our heads were cooler. At all events, I tell you now."

"Griplock, you are a deep one."

"Thank you. Suppose you examine the handkerchief."

The show-master did so.

"One corner is stiffened," said he, "as if with some stain that has recently dried upon it."

"True—a blood-stain! I have examined it under a magnifier—poor Mr. Vanderpoer's life-blood!"

"Ha! And yet there was little external bleeding from the fatal thrust."

"Still, there was some."

"Going to show that the murder was committed before the abstraction of the papers from the trunk, where the handkerchief was probably dropped accidentally."

"Precisely."

Mr. Isaacs drew a long breath, and wiped his perspiring forehead.

"A close-linked conspiracy!" he exclaimed. "It is wonderful—no less wonderful than horrible! Have you anything else?"

"One thing more."

He displayed a large and heavy horn-handled clasp-knife.

It was open, the long, broad blade being redly stained and streaked, as though hastily and imperfectly wiped, after the commission of a bloody deed, and perhaps on the very handkerchief that had just been produced.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the showman; "the fatal knife?"

"It is."

"Does it fit the wound?"

"It does."

"What! you know this?"

"Almost to a certainty. I measured the wound carefully with my eye, which measurement I look for the coroner's formal examination to verify."

"Where did you find the knife?"

"In the side-show tent."

"But exactly where?"

"Among Purring Pedro's stock-playthings."

"It was never in the box before?"

"Never—before the animal's last performance, at all events."

"Think you it had been placed there since—the murder?"

"Yes; doubtless with the intention of finding a seurer hiding-place for it later on."

"So; and a shrewd first hiding-place was that same tool-chest of the dancing bear's."

"It was."

"How did you, how could you, chance to hit upon it?"

"By a little fortunate deduction. Gogo and Kalulah being already more or less incriminated to my mind, what more natural than to connect them with their companion curiosity the performing bear?"

"True. Griplock, you are a detective in a thousand. Is the knife familiar to you?"

"Never saw it before to-day."

"Nor I. Whom can it belong to?"

"Examine the handle."

Mr. Isaacs hastened to do so.

"Ha! there are initials stamped on it, together with some words in a strange jargon."

"Well, the initials first."

"J. V. It is sufficiently plain. J. V.—J. V."

"Can't you place them?"

"I confess that I cannot, at once."

"J. V. stands for John Vincent; otherwise Center-pole Jack."

"Heavens! it is even so. And what is this gibberish that follows?"

"It is not gibberish."

"What then?"

"A motto in the Romany or Zingari dialect, signifying 'A good weapon is a friend indeed.'"

"And what then?"

"Center-pole Jack is an English Gypsy."

"So he is. What a chain you have already constructed out of these chance links! And what are we to infer from it all?"

"That Gogo, Kalulah and Center-pole Jack are all connected with the crime, though perhaps but indirectly."

"Indirectly?"

"Yes."

"Then your suspicions still center on Leomeister as the master-spirit in the foul deed?"

"Yes; though of course I may wrong him."

"He certainly seemed both surprised and on his guard at the suddenness of his release."

"Yes; he is a deep one. He at once suspected the very motive for which you withdraw the charges, which was to throw him off his guard."

"Well, what must be done?"

"We must keep our clews and our suspicions to ourselves, until we can both track home the crime to its author, and secure the recovery of the missing casket at one stroke."

"Ah, I see; otherwise the papers, that are so vital to Zelda's future, might be destroyed by their purloiner, either through fear or resentment."

"Exactly."

"And to do this, you advise to let the course of municipal justice grope and blunder along in the case as best it may, at least for the present."

"I do. In other words, we must keep our own counsel, watch and wait."

"Agreed."

And the show-master struck hands with the detective.

It was now about noon, and Mr. Isaacs had, on second thoughts, decided to suspend the show performances for that and the succeeding day, out of respect to the dead proprietor.

The detective arose.

"How is Zelda doing?" he asked.

"Sadly enough," was the reply. "Poor girl! I feared at first she would lose her reason. But my wife and daughters had succeeded in composing her, with the help of opiates, a short time ago."

Griplock hesitated.

"I should like greatly to speak with her—in your presence, if you choose—should she not be sleeping. It is important, and might even help her through the shock."

"Come with me," said Mr. Isaacs. "I will consult my wife."

Mrs. Isaacs, an amiable, motherly woman, who was the wardrobe-custodian of the show, was found in a neighboring room with her two comely daughters, Kitty and Mildred, both of them circus-riders of deserved notoriety.

Mrs. Isaacs, on being informed of the detective's request, pointed to the closed door of an inner chamber.

"She has been very quiet in there for over an hour now," said she, in a low voice. "Before that the poor child was moaning or crying out at intervals, as if half or quite delirious. She may now be sleeping."

"Constantly harping on the murder, of course?"

"Not wholly so. At the last, strangely enough, her thoughts seemed running upon you, Mr. Crimmins. Your name was frequently on her tongue. It struck us all as odd, knowing, as we do, that you could have had but a slight acquaintance with her prior to the events among the cages last night."

Griplock cast down his eyes, while handsome Kitty, who, together with her sister, had been exchanging a few words with him apart, suddenly looked up with a suspiciously inquiring (or was it a jealous?) gleam in her quick black eyes.

"You might as well know it at once," said Mr. Isaacs, explainingly. "Mr. Crimmins has confided to me that he has been personally acquainted with Zelda much longer than is generally supposed. It was his intention to explain matters to her adoptive father on this very day."

The ladies were greatly surprised, Miss Kitty even to the extent of slightly overdoing the expression thereof.

Then, at the show-master's suggestion, his wife stepped into the inner chamber, to see if Zelda might still be awake.

Almost instantly she came hurrying back, with a scared look, and the intimation that the young girl was no longer there.

There was, naturally enough, a sensation.

"Wait!" cried Mrs. Isaacs. "The room communicates with a minor passage, leading to a back-stairs. I will summon Polly Graves, her maid."

But at this moment Polly, dressed for the street, entered the room from the main corridor.

Polly was a very faithful creature, and a Cockney.

"Oh, mum! Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, panting. "My poor young leddy is hout of her head—haltogether hoff her base. I'm sure of it!"

She went on to explain that she had met her young mistress coming down the back stairs, attired for the street, but looking dazed and lost-like, and had followed her out of the hotel, until peremptorily confronted and ordered to return instantly, under penalty of discharge from her employment.

"Oh, the poor, un'appy creatur!" sobbed the maid-in-waiting, wringing her hands; "what could I do but obey? And I'm sure she were goin' for the big tent, too; for she 'ad the 'orse-look in her eyes, for hall of their wildness; an' her skirts fell just as if they was a-riding of one of her costumes underneath 'em. She might 'ave made the change hall quiet like, the poor little mouse! in the room yonder while yous all thought her asleep."

"Come," said Mr. Isaacs, touching his elbow to the detective's. "There is doubtless no cause for alarm, but we must find her."

The faces of Mrs. Isaacs and her younger daughter, Mildred, expressed anxious concern as the two men hurried away, but that of Kitty was dark with a frowning discontent that did not improve its beauty, which, by the way, was beyond question.

A crowd of sight-seers and horror-mongers was gathered before the hotel across the way as Mr. Isaacs and Griplock emerged upon the street.

In fact, they had not proceeded many steps before Leomeister, followed by Gogo and Kalulah, came out of the throng, and hurried toward them.

"They've made an arrest!" he announced, with much eagerness. "The coroner's already at work, and has already ordered one arrest on suspicion."

"Yes," hissed Gogo. "And I fancy they're not far out of the way."

"Ah!" put in the Girl-Fish, "but what else could you expect? I always had my doubts about that soft-stepping private secretary."

Both Mr. Isaacs and Griplock had by this time had a chance to master and conceal their surprise.

"What!" exclaimed Griplock, "is Gaston Larue under arrest?"

"Yes," answered the lion-tamer, "and you should have seen how white he turned. He trembled, too. Everybody remarked upon it."

"That is bad, bad, bad!" exclaimed the show-master, following the detective's cue. "Go on, and find out some fresh news. We will rejoin you presently."

The side-show trio hurried back to the central horror, while the two others resumed their way.

"What stupidity!" commented Mr. Isaacs. "Larue could have had no more to do with the murder than you or I."

"Of course not," assured the detective. "But we shall get back in time to relieve him of his embarrassment. We must now think only of Zelda."

Several of the show-people looked at them curiously as they approached the great tent.

Then Zelda's voice—but, oh, how changed!—cheering her favorite horse was heard through the canvas, and, as they entered the main or circus compartment, a strange spectacle was presented.

CHAPTER VI.

ZELDA.

STANDING on Black Sultan's bare back, and rapidly careering around the great sawdust ring, Zelda was in the midst of her most approved equestrian feat, for the benefit of the vast amphitheater of empty benches, and two or three wondering, awe-struck employees gathered at the dressing-room entrance.

She was in one of her most brilliant, and at the same time most classic and modest costumes; that of the huntress-divinity Diana, silver bow in hand, golden quiver at shoulder, and whose romantic witchery, from the neat, laced sandals to the gleaming crescent on her brow, with its soft tunic of green and the loosened leopard-skin flowing back in free, barbaric glory, set off her superb maidenly proportions to the most charming advantage.

But her raven hair was streaming, like a tempestuous hood, down her back; the hectic spots on her otherwise marble cheeks were like coals of fire, her beautiful eyes were ablaze with unnatural excitement, and the sharp, harsh words with which she urged the flying steed, already going at a dangerous gait, were tinged with delirium.

"On, Sultan, on!" she shouted. "Papa is in peril! The murderer will overtake him first, and even Griplock, who is just ahead, may not intercept the relentless fiend. Ha! I see the flashing of the murderous steel. On, on, I say! We shall be too late! Sultan, are you shod with leaden clogs? What foul fiend mars your magic pace? On, on, on!"

And so it continued, the voice now sinking to a hoarse whisper, and now again rising to a shrill, thin sort of scream.

"Corpo di Bacchio, sir! We tried to interfere in her caprice, but she wouldn't hear of it. After throwing off her street-dress in the green-room, she rushed like one frantic, to the stables adjoining, run out Sultan with her own hands, and was off like a bird before we could decide what to do. May the saints preserve the child! She is surely demented!"

It was Signor Spezzi, the Italian ringmaster, who spoke, and tears were in his eyes as he did so.

"This is dreadful!" said Mr. Isaacs. "An attack of brain fever may come upon the girl. We must get her home and to bed at any cost."

"Leave it to me," and Griplock Crimmins, whose face was set like iron in the effort to conceal his solicitude for the girl's pitiable condition, glided noiselessly to the side of the ring.

Suddenly he sprang directly in the path of the careering steed, folded his arms, and, catching Zelda's wandering gaze, called out in Spanish, in a voice at once clear, rich and melodious:

"Lo, the llanos, the llanos! Once more we are free!"

As Black Sultan, obedient to a warning cry from his bird-like rider, swerved to one side, and came to a half-rearing pause, she regarded the detective with parted lips and a startled look, into which, at the same time, a flash of half-recognition was struggling.

Suddenly, in a rich, powerful, barytone voice, the detective burst forth with the following frontiersman's fragment:

"I'll sing you a song of the prairie bold,
The broad and sweeping plains,
Where adventure's zest, not fame or gold,
Makes up our care-free gains.
For the ranger's life hurrah, hurrah!
With days into hours compressed.
Boot, saddle and spur! and then all for her,
For the girl that he loves the best!"

"On our mustangs gray we took our way
With the ranger's merry band,
And our camp-fires shone as the sun went down
On the banks of the Rio Grand',
For the old, wild life huzzah, huzzah!
Then a hand-clasp ere we part.
Boot, spur and lasso! and then off to woo
The queen of the ranger's heart!"

Poised on the bare back of the balked steed, Zelda had listened like one entranced, a soft, melting look coming gradually into her face.

Then she sprang to the ground, her features and eyes aglow, but still as if unconscious of her surroundings.

"The old, the wild, the free life, with its loveliness and its passion!" she cried, extending her arms toward the singer. "Oh, the beauty and the glory of it, that may come no more!"

And she fell, fainting, into his arms.

She was at once taken in charge by the show-master's wife and daughters, who had also lost no time in hurrying to the tent, and by them conveyed to a close carriage that was in waiting.

"Time enough to restore her when we get back," said good Mrs. Isaacs, pillowing the drooping head on her shoulder, as they were rapidly driven away. "Poor child! the faint may prove all the better for her."

"As if either faint or delirium were genuine!" muttered Kitty Isaacs, spitefully. "Any way, she had her scene out with that—that odious detective, all the same."

Her face was white and drawn, while her eyes were sparkling angrily.

Her mother and sister looked up at her, the former with astonishment and reproof, the latter with a comprehending little half-smile.

Indeed, perhaps Mildred knew too much.

"Sour grapes!" said she, pityingly. "Kitty, you are making a fool of yourself."

But, just then, she herself started back from the coach window, her face on fire, a half-pleased, half-ashamed smile on her pretty lips.

They were passing the crowd before the hotel in which the tragedy had taken place, and Professor Conrad Leomeister, the renowned side-showman and lion-tamer, had raised his hat and bowed with a lavish mixture of politeness and admiration.

"Sour grapes, indeed!" retorted Kitty, spitefully. "Don't let me hear that again, Miss Impudence, if you don't want to be made to feel cheap—decidedly cheap."

The coach had reached its destination, and good Mrs. Isaacs viewed this sisterly interchange with manifest bewilderment—dear soul!—as she accepted their help in carrying her lovely and unconscious burden into the hotel.

Meanwhile, the show-master had started to hurry back to the scene of the tragedy with the detective, when the latter delayed long enough to usher him into the little side-show tent.

The sole occupant was the performing animal, Purring Pedro, a huge, comical looking Russian brown bear, which sat grotesquely sucking his paws in the small, pit-like corner, with a climbing-pole in the center, that was his special domain.

He reared and reached out toward them the length of his chain, as they entered, with the purring, whining sort of growl for which he was named; the number of empty beer-bottles scattered around sufficiently explaining both the cause and object of his entreaties, for Pedro was hilariously comical at every opportunity.

On a small platform, next to the pit, was the glass tank in which the Mermaid, or Girl-Fish, was wont to disport herself for the delectation of the curious public, with her little curtained dressing-room directly behind it.

And next to that was the artificial jungle, filled with numerous make-believe nooks, crevices, rock-fissures and rootlet-holes, through which Gogo, the Man-Snake of Borneo, was accustomed to grin, hiss, writhe and twine his ophidian way in all the unenviable glory of scale, spot and spangle.

The detective opened a small, greasy-looking chest containing the various trick-toys of the learned Bruin.

"It was deep down under all those," said he pointing to the heterogeneous mass, "that I found the fatal knife."

"Try the brute with it now," suggested Mr. Isaacs. "If he takes to it kindly, on the promise of some beer, we can safely reserve it for a test-trick hereafter."

Griplock did so, and with considerable success, the animal first snuffing the knife curiously, and then beginning to toss it playfully from one paw to the other.

They were interrupted by an approaching footstep.

The detective had barely time to conceal the knife again before the Gypsy, Center-pole Jack, entered.

CHAPTER VII.

GASTON LARUE.

HAD the man, unaware of their presence, stolen into the tent to re-secure the murderous instrument from the place where he might have temporarily hidden it?

This thought occurred simultaneously to both the show-master and the detective.

But no; he looked at them in some surprise,

nothing more, and said that he was looking for a mislaid monkey-wrench.

He then alluded to Mr. Vanderpoer's death, with a creditable display of feeling in so reticent a man, and they quitted the tent together.

"That fellow is a puzzler," commented Griplock, when Center-pole Jack had gone his way. "But the knife can belong to no other than he."

"He is a cool card—perhaps innocent, to boot," answered Mr. Isaacs. "Wait till he can be submitted to a test or two."

Arriving at the inquest, they found that Gaston Larue had just been discharged from arrest, the coroner having vacated his original order shortly after it had been made.

The pale secretary had conclusively proved an alibi, with several witnesses to his having gone, directly after his final separation from the deceased, when Griplock had likewise been present, to a newspaper office in a neighboring town, at whose single hotel he had passed the night.

Then Griplock gave his testimony as to his last interview with Mr. Vanderpoer, though keeping his own counsel as to the subsequent discoveries he had made.

Zelda's condition was made known, as precluding the idea of anything being elicited from her.

The unimportant testimony of several of the hotel people threw no light upon the author of the crime, and a physician had already testified as to the nature of the death-producing wound, with indications that it had been effected during the victim's sleep.

No deadly weapon was forthcoming; robbery had apparently not been the motive of the crime; Leomeister, the only person who might have cherished revenge, had passed the night in jail; when Zelda's screams had first announced the discovery of the crime, at six in the morning, the body had long been cold, proving that death could not have occurred much later than midnight; the assassin, after probably entering the room by an open window overlooking a side-street, at but a short distance from the ground, had left not the slightest trace of his identity, and that was all.

After tedious deliberations the coroner's jury reluctantly brought in the customary verdict as to ignorance and mystification, and the investigation was at an end.

Gaston Larue approached a group composed of Mr. Isaacs, Griplock Crimmins, Leomeister, and the latter's two satellites, Gogo and Kalulah.

His pale, attenuated face, with its thin line of mustache, seemed to have grown yet paler, and his brooding eyes were full of voiceless grief, as he signed the detective to draw apart with him.

"Surely you, sir," said he, "could not have been one of those to imagine me concerned in this thing?"

"Not for an instant," was the prompt response; "nor did Mr. Isaacs either."

"I am glad of that, very glad," continued Larue, in his quiet, melancholy voice. "Pray tell me about Miss Zelda—how is she bearing it?"

Griplock eyed him keenly.

No; the pale secretary could not cherish other than a brotherly feeling for the beautiful girl. His manner was devoid of passion, though expressive of the strongest solicitude and anxiety.

"I wished to tell you," he went on, after his question had been answered, "that Mr. Vanderpoer, to my knowledge, made a will when last in New York, though I am not aware of what he did with it."

"It is in Mr. Isaacs's keeping," the detective at once assured him. "He told me so."

"Mr. Vanderpoer was my only friend," Gaston continued, tremulously, after a long pause. "His cruel taking-off leaves me alone in the world. Do you think, sir, that I shall now necessarily be separated from Miss Zelda? I mean that—that Mr. Isaacs, now that he is sole master of the show, will have no further use for my services?"

There was a world of painful suspense in the poor fellow's tone and manner.

"On the contrary," assured the detective, kindly, "Mr. Isaacs has told me that he will retain your services, which he values highly."

"Oh, I am glad, so glad! One thing more, sir. I have something that may interest you."

"What is it, Mr. Larue?"

"In the earlier part of the inquest, I was near Leomeister and Gogo, who were in a gloomy and secluded corner of the room, without being aware of my proximity. Kalulah, who had been with them a short time before, had disappeared. Presently she returned, pushing her way toward them through the crowd, and quite out of breath. The exchange of words, which I then overheard, struck me as perhaps of importance, though I did not exactly understand their significance."

"What did you overhear?"

"It is gone!" said Kalulah, in a terrified way. Leomeister seemed no less startled. "Gone!" he repeated. "Are you sure?" "Yes, and Griplock must have taken it. He was seen about the smaller tent an hour ago." Leomeister caught his breath, and then his face

seemed like a fiend's, it was so malevolent and resolved. "We must recover it," said he, savagely. "The knife must be recovered at the first opportunity, and at any cost, or it may be that we are lost!"

"Ha! said he that? What more?"

"Nothing. They all moved away after that. But does this really interest you, Mr. Crimmins?"

"More so than you can imagine. Keep mum! That is all I ask of you."

And the detective lost no time in rejoining the show-master, from whom the others had just separated.

It was now evening, the weather having turned rainy.

A few hours later, having dined alone with Mr. Isaacs, the Circus Detective started for an investigating stroll in the direction of the tents.

The streets were deserted, save for a graceful feminine figure in a water-proof, who had just met under a corner-lamp a man whom the detective recognized as Leomeister, and was going off with him.

As the party disappeared, the woman dropped her pocket-handkerchief, which the detective appropriated for the time being.

A few moments later, while crossing the unlighted open ground about the tents, which seemed wholly deserted, he suddenly received a stunning blow on the back of the head.

Then, while still tottering, a body was hurled against him, he was twined with arms and legs like so many serpents, he struggled desperately for an instant, like a modern Laocoon; then there was a second blow, and then he was unconscious.

Restored by the rain beating upon his face, he found himself gagged and bound, and being carried rapidly into the dimly-lighted animal-tent among the cages.

"You are sure you searched him thoroughly?" queried a cautious voice.

"Dead sure," replied another. "The knife isn't on him."

"No matter. Away with him to the elephant's pen, where Big Rajah will soon trample the life out of him in the dark."

"But not perhaps beyond recognition. No, no; rather into Othmar's cage. The brute hasn't been fed for forty-eight hours—I have seen to that. Nothing but rags and bones will be left of him by morning."

"All right. To the lion's den."

The detective shuddered, as he was brought to a pause before Othmar's cage.

The shudder betrayed his return to consciousness.

"Griplock Crimmins, you are doomed!" whispered one of the voices in his ear. "Curse you, a horrible death is at hand for you!"

Then the helpless detective was summarily thrust into Othmar's cage, the door of it was bolted behind him, and his captors disappeared.

The lion, which had been pacing the cage, restless with hunger, fixed his flaming eyes upon his prospective victim.

Then, with a famished roar, he made his deadly spring.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE LION'S JAWS.

NOTWITHSTANDING his terrible situation, the Circus Detective had not lost his presence of mind.

Though bound and gagged, he had, by a tremendous effort, managed to attain a sitting posture with his back propped against the end of the cage, as soon as his cowardly assailants had hurried away, leaving him, to all appearances, irretrievably at the savage Othmar's mercy.

Griplock's remarkable eyes, and the exceptional power he was able to exert with them, have already been alluded to.

This power—now exerted to its utmost intensity, as we may well believe—arrested the lion in his first spring, which had thereupon been curtailed into a sort of half-leap, and he now stood confronting his prospective prey, open-mouthed, with glowing orbs, and lashing his sides furiously with his tufted tail, yet still held off by the superiority and mystic might of the dilating, dauntless gaze that so imperiously riveted his own.

But still, none could know better than the detective that this superiority must of necessity be of short duration.

Already he felt the immensity of his exertion of will-power fast exhausting him, while he knew that the lion's exceptional hunger and native ferocity were slowly but surely counter-acting it.

It was intelligence against savagery—human as opposed to brute fearlessness—and the strange, mysterious contest of will-powers continued.

For a moment there was a dead silence, unbroken by so much as a growl.

Griplock felt that the first interruption of this hush on the lion's part, were it by a mere snarl or by a thunderous roar, would be the signal that the spell was at an end and his own doom sealed.

His brain became painfully, almost supernaturally active.

A hundred reflections flashed upon him in that trying moment, yet, strange to say, they were not of present fear, but of the causes that had so oddly contributed to his critical position.

"Why were the tents wholly deserted? Where were under-keepers and tent-hands, whose accustomed duty it was to be on night-guard by regular watches? By what plotting means had his assailants secured this silence and this solitude in the tents, as accessories to their infernal scheme? Had they been two, three or four in number? Had Leomeister, or Gogo, or Kalulah, or Center-pole Jack, or one and all of them, constituted their force? He felt sure of the complicity of one or more of them—especially of the Man-Snake's, from the serpentine manner in which he had been tackled, wreathed and entwined, directly after receiving the first staggering blow; but had he recognized anything clearly distinguishing in their faces, forms or voices?"

No; he had not; even in the improbable event of his rescue, he could swear to nothing in the way of identifying the fiends in human form.

His reflections were interrupted by a tremendous roar.

The spell was snapped.

Othmar was crouching for his master-spring. The indomitableness of the detective was about resigning itself to the inevitable.

Doubtless, in another second he would be a mangled mass under those crunching jaws.

His chin dropped upon his breast, he was about vailing resignedly those eyes of his, dauntless still, but subjugating no longer.

All was over.

But there was a chorus of shouting voices, a trampling of many feet, a flashing of torches, yells of encouragement.

A thousand million painful sparks were dancing before his eyes.

Then, as his brute antagonist was thrust and belabored back to his cover, the detective was torn out of the cage, only to sink, half-fainting, in his rescuer's arms.

But, terrible as was the reaction, he was quickly himself again, though in a half-bewildered way.

"Santo Marco!" exclaimed Signor Spezzi, who had headed the rescuing party, "how came you in this position?"

Griplock told his story, Center-pole Jack being prominent among the appalled listeners.

"This is simply horrible!" exclaimed the ring-master. "Of course you can identify your assailants?"

"That is the worst of it, signor; I am afraid I cannot," was the bitter reply. "But explain the mystery on your parts. Why were the tents unguarded, and why are you so suddenly on hand in the nick of time?"

The first part of the question was speedily explained.

A note to the ring-master in Mr. Isaac's handwriting, since discovered to be a forgery, had called all hands to a distant quarter of the town, ostensibly to take charge of some newly-purchased tent-wagons, which turned out to be altogether mythical.

The second part was answered by pointing to a statuesque figure, in a voluminous water-proof, glistening with raindrops, standing silently apart from the rest, in whom the detective, to his unbounded astonishment, recognized—Zelda.

"Santo Marco! approach her not yet," whispered Spezzi, laying his hand on the other's arm. "It is a rapture—a transfiguration!"

All the others, even including Center-pole Jack, were gazing at the motionless figure with similar awe and wonder.

"What mean you?" demanded the detective.

"It was even thus that she sought and found us, floundering about in the muddy open lots, in search of the impossible wagons."

"Even thus?"

"Yes, as you see her now—mechanically, commandingly, and silently until she cried out, in a hollow, half-muffled way: 'Griplock is in peril! bound and speechless, he is being hurried away into Othmar's cruel jaws. I can see him now. Hasten, if ye would save him—follow me!' And so she led us back to the tents, solemnly, swiftly, glidingly, without speaking another word. And we are here."

Suddenly the detective, who had been studying the statuesque figure earnestly, exclaimed:

"Why, she is asleep! It is a case of sleep-walking and of second-sight!"

"Ha! is it even so?"

It was the truth!

Such of the young girl's face as could be seen beneath the hood of her waterproof was marble-pale, and yet with a rapt, ecstatic expression, while the parted lips and wide, unseeing eyes were as those of the confined dead.

The detective motioned his rescuers to silence, drew the young girl's hand through his arm, and quietly led her away.

It was only when restored to Mrs. Isaacs's care that Zelda awoke out of her sleep-walking trance.

When sufficiently recovered from her bewil-

derment, she related the particulars of the clairvoyant vision which had prompted her somnambulist movements in the detective's behalf, and was then once more put to bed in a state of high excitement, and the physician summoned.

Griplock and Mr. Isaacs were still together, entertaining grave fears as to the result to the young girl's nervous organization, already overtaxed by the shock of the morning.

Their fears were agreeably dispelled by the entrance of the physician, who had been fully informed of his patient's strange experience.

"Physical exhaustion is often a splendid counter-irritant," said he, cheerfully. "All danger of brain fever is passed, and our beautiful invalid is enjoying a restorative, natural sleep. She will soon be herself again physically, though of course the original shock will continue to affect her spirits for some time forth."

And he took his departure in high good-humor with what nature and accident had wrought, with little or no aid from his physic.

Greatly relieved at what he had heard, the Circus Detective went on to give the show-master a full account of his extraordinary adventure.

"This is simply appalling!" said Mr. Isaacs, the forgery of whose handwriting caused him especial uneasiness. "What! and you could not swear to the identity of your cowardly assailants?"

"No, I could not."

"But you have your suspicions?"

"I suspect them to have been two in number, and those two Leomeister and Gogo."

"Which would have left Kalulah, the Girl-Fish, to counterfeit my handwriting, for she is known to be clever with the pen."

"I thought her accomplishments chiefly sub-aqueous."

"No; or at least not always. She was originally a card-writer. I must obtain the forged message of Spezzi."

"Wait, I have it. The worthy signor slipped it into my hand as I was taking Zelda away."

And Griplock forthwith produced the paper. Mr. Isaacs scrutinized it.

"I give it up," said he. "The forgery is perfect. Apart from its purport, I would acknowledge the handwriting as my own anywhere. Griplock, you are the object of diabolical and remorseless plottings."

The detective smiled.

"That is self-evident," said he.

"But Center-pole Jack is, at least, out of this attempt upon your life, it would seem?"

"I am not so sure of that."

"But wasn't he one of the rescuing party?"

"True; but he seemed harder-breathed than the others. He might have joined them shortly before reaching the tents. I shall make inquiries."

"That will be well. Now what are you going to do about it all?"

"Watch and wait."

Mr. Isaacs knitted his brows.

"But that is what you said before," said he, "and yet were you almost done for at the first step."

"I shall be on my guard."

"Do so. Of course I am with you through thick and thin. It is very late; good-night. Be careful of the entrance below. The hotel-front is being repaired, as you ought to know."

The rain had continued, the hour was late, the private entrance, by which the detective was making his way out of the hotel, dimly lighted and incumbered by builder's materials.

At the lower step of the descent from Mr. Isaacs's rooms, he stumbled over what appeared to be a huge black package, covered with a tarpaulin.

The "package" proved to be the cloaked figure of a masked man of Herculean proportions, who suddenly bounded to his feet, and enveloped the stumbler in a tremendous wrestling clutch.

Simultaneously with this attack, the figure of another masked man—a long, lithe, serpentine figure—glided from an angle of the wall, knife in hand, and scattering some blinding, stifling, peppery substance out of a paper bag.

Peering in at the narrow street-door was yet another masked form—a very graceful form, suggesting a woman's in masculine attire.

Though thus beset and taken by surprise, the Circus Detective was 'all there' in an instant.

Blinking his eyes to avoid the peppery substance as much as possible, he brought his irresistible griplock to bear at once, and crash went his muscular first assailant on the marble flagging with stunning force.

At the same time the flashing descent of the knife was evaded.

But the powder was now filling the air, and the detective could no longer see.

However, he managed to strike down his would-be stabber before being quite blinded.

Then, being likewise too stifled to call for assistance, he made a groping rush for the graceful figure at the doorway.

But he was evaded, with a low, mocking laugh.

A fresh, powerful hand seized him as he staggered into the open air, and something was slipped over his head and neck.

It proved to be a hempen noose.

There was a creaking sound, and he was lifted off his feet.

Then, as he instinctively felt for the straining rope above his choking head, his wrists were nimbly seized and bound tightly together with a strap.

"Up with him!" said a harsh, grating voice.

There was a pull from somewhere, a noise of a block and tackle in operation, and Griplock Crimmins was dangling, suspended by the neck, midway up the face of the hotel, fully fifty feet from the ground.

"That will do," he heard the same voice growl out far below. "He's done for. Make the end fast."

Then there was a scampering of retreating steps, and he was left to his airy dance—to the wind, the darkness and the beating rain.

CHAPTER IX.

STRUNG UP.

BUT the murderous would-be hangmen had not made so sure of their victim as they supposed.

Griplock had been cleverly noosed to a rope connected with a derrick, or tackle-beam, projecting from the hotel cornice, and then run up to remain where he was till thoroughly strangled.

But just previous to the tightening of the noose he had drawn in his chin, so that the chief pressure was upon that and the back of his muscular neck, instead of around his throat.

Otherwise, he must surely have been throttled in a brief space.

As it was, though the pain was great and not to be long endured, he retained his consciousness, while the wet night-air speedily relieved his eyes and nostrils of the noxious powder that had been showered upon him.

At first he was dangling with his back to the building.

But the wind soon began to twirl him around, first one way, then the other.

In the course of these twirlings, he managed to thrust out his foot and arrest himself before a bedroom window.

The sash was down, and the gas-jet within turned down low, but he could obtain a tolerably distinct view of the interior.

It was larger than the average of hotel sleeping-rooms, and contained a large double bed, provided with old-fashioned curtains, as if originally intended for some invalid, or morbidly exclusive individual, fearful of the open air even in slumber.

One side of the bed was still waiting for its occupant.

The other was occupied by a sleeper, a young woman, whose face was not visible in the dim light.

But her discarded gaiters seemed to be water-soaked and muddy, and the water-proof hanging from a near nail was still sparkling with rain-drops, showing that the sleeper was not long in out of the stormy streets.

Upon one listless hand, thrown out from under the counterpane, sparkled a ring, the sight of which would have caused the detective a start of surprise in any other than the dangling position he occupied.

Even in that trying position and by that uncertain light, he thought he recognized the ring, but was not sure of it.

Of course, these observations were made at a single glance, and already the strain on his neck was nearly beyond endurance.

Scarcely had he made them before another young woman entered the room, and partly turned up the light.

It was Kitty Isaacs, and the sleeper was now recognizable as her sister Mildred.

As may well be surmised, the embarrassment of the detective was unparalleled.

The pain of his dangling there had become an agony; and yet, there he was, with the interior of the young ladies' bedroom as his only hope of escape from a horrible death.

To add to his embarrassment, Miss Kitty, after drawing from her bosom a miniature and kissing it, at once began to prepare for bed.

"There is no help for it," thought the detective, with an internal groan; and he forthwith tapped on the window with the toe of his boot.

Kitty turned with a start, advanced to the window, looked out, and gave a little cry.

But, she was a young woman of exceptional nerve and self-possession.

In an instant she had mastered her amazement and recognized the suspended man.

Then, without a word, to raise the sash, grasp his body firmly, draw him into the room, and relieve him from his agonizing situation, was but the work of another moment.

"Wait!"

She ran to the bed, closed its curtains, and returned.

The noose was now dangling empty outside the window.

Griplock was collapsed in a chair, with starting eyes, one hand clasping his chin, the other the nape of his neck.

He was, moreover, almost black in the face, though slowly recovering his natural color.

Kitty Isaacs clasped her hands.

The secret of her passion was sufficiently apparent now, if never before.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a sob; "what can I do for you?"

Griplock could only thrust out his parched and swollen tongue in response.

She sprung to the water-pitcher, but it was empty.

"Wait yet a moment! Signor Spezzi has the adjoining room; I heard him stirring as I passed his door."

She darted out of the room, and returned with Spezzi, who, most fortunately, had not begun to undress.

The latter was no less astounded than Kitty, but he carried a half-filled glass of water in one hand, a flask of brandy in the other.

Brimming the remainder of the glass with spirits, he forced the mixture to the last drop down the detective's throat.

The latter drew a reviving breath, and staggered feebly to his feet.

"Come!" said Spezzi, and with the nervy young woman's help, he forthwith led him into the adjoining room.

But the Circus Detective was never so far gone as not to have at least half an eye for business.

As he passed the couch on his way out, he got a closer glimpse of the ring—an odd ring, with a ruby and emerald setting—on the sleeper's outstretched hand, which was still peeping through the closed curtains.

It was enough. He recognized it as a ring which he had often remarked on Leomeister's left hand.

Mildred Isaacs, then, was that companion of the lion-tamer's under the street-lamp in the rain, shortly prior to the last episode of the lion's cage.

Once in Spezzi's easy-chair, Griplock was sufficiently revived to recount the story of his last astounding adventure.

Kitty listened, with her eyes hardly once removed from the narrator's face.

Spezzi, with equal attentiveness, but with his eyes as steadfastly fixed upon Kitty's face.

"This is horrible!" exclaimed the former. "Of course, Mr. Crimmins, you will at once inform the police?"

"By no means," declared the detective, now himself again. "I am accustomed to do my own policing."

"But—"

"And, moreover, I must first be sure of the identity of my torturers."

"Then you are uncertain of that?"

"Wholly so; though they were doubtless also concerned in my previous adventure of this evening."

"I am ignorant as to that, though mamma hinted something of it just before I came up from her rooms."

The detective told of the lion's cage incident, to which Signor Spezzi also had something to say.

Kitty's comely face was expressive of her discontent, in spite of herself.

"Always Zelda—always that girl chancing to his rescue, save in to-night's emergency," she said to herself. "But is he not now equally beholden to me? He would have strangled but for my timely aid; the peril from which I succored him was fully as appalling as Othmar's hungry clutch itself."

But, poor Signor Spezzi for one, was oblivious of this significant disappointment in the face of the show-master's daughter, for whom he had long cherished a but too apparent passion, though mostly with no other reward than to be carelessly snubbed or derided by Kitty herself.

"Ah, but you are a fortunate man, Meester Crimmins," he sighed, dolefully, and with worse broken English than was his wont.

"Fortunate in what?" asked the detective, in surprise. "In being twice nearly done to death in one night?"

"Not exactly that," explained the ring-master, forlornly. "But even hanging must be a delirium, an ecstasy, if one is to be rescued from the rope by such adorable hands as Mees Kitty's!"

"Oh, go along with your nonsense!" retorted the young woman, rudely, at which Signor Spezzi looked as if he had been stabbed.

"It is too bad!" said he, with tears in his dark eyes. "Why do I consent to remain with the show, even though Mr. Isaacs informs me that I must be no more the ring-master, but the Grimaldi, the clown, again? Why, but for the bright eyes that will not see my love, or, seeing, but despises it."

"Cheer up, signor!" encouraged Griplock. "Mr. Isaacs told me of the change he contemplates. You will get better pay as the show's jester, and, as we are now without a clown, the change became a necessity."

"I didn't mean to wound you, Mr. Spezzi," added Kitty, relentingly. "But you are so provoking at times!"

Then she started up.

"Bless me!" she exclaimed, looking at her watch; "it is past two o'clock!"

The detective had already started to quit the

room, after saying good-night and announcing his intention to avail himself this time of the wide public place of exit below.

Signor Spezzi closed his door behind them with a parting sigh.

When upon the first dimly-lighted stair-landing on his way down, the detective heard a light footstep behind.

He turned and paused at perceiving Kitty Isaacs following him.

"Please don't consider me bold, Mr. Crimmins," said she, but blushing nevertheless. "I wish to say something that I could not very well say before that ridiculous Mr. Spezzi."

"You are wrong to speak of him so, Miss Isaacs," returned Griplock, gravely. "Mr. Spezzi may be full of foreign ways, but he is both a worthy and a handsome man. He is an ornament to the profession, has simple tastes, unexceptionable habits, is fairly well-to-do, and would make the woman so fortunate as to win his love an excellent husband. But, what is it you would say to me?"

She colored angrily, and bit her pretty lip.

"Ah, what a brute I am!" added the detective, remorsefully. "Here I am presuming to lecture you, *you*, with my life freshly saved by your hands!"

"Don't speak of that, sir!" she interposed, quickly. "Never allude to it again, if you would not mortally offend me! As if the pleasure, the gratification and the glory of it were not all on my side! As if, for the bare privilege of being of vital service to you, I would not undergo—"

She broke off abruptly, and then proceeded, after an emotional pause:

"I wish to say, sir, that if I can ever be of any use in helping you to identify these secret, deadly foes of yours, I hope you will command me."

There was something frank and unselfish in her manner now.

The detective meditated, and then regarded her gravely and steadily.

"You may be able to help me materially, Miss Kitty," he declared. "I will gladly tell you how, if, at the same time, you will accept a confidence from me."

"Pray go on, sir!" requested Kitty, puzzled by his tone.

"I shall do so. You must know, then, that my heart is absolutely devoted to Zelda Vanderpoer, whom it is the dearest hope of my existence to one day call my wife."

The girl winced and whitened. It was a bitter stroke—he meant it as such, in all kindness; but she accepted it bravely, notwithstanding that it shocked her woman's nature to its inmost depths.

In an instant she was calm.

"I suspected as much, sir," said she, coldly. "But pray, what has this confession—unsolicited by me, be pleased to remember—to do with the deadliness of your secret foes?"

"Much—everything, in fact! They are Zelda's foes as well. Indeed, it is solely on her account, together with the mystery of her adoptive father's murder, that I am thus pursued with this deadliness and persistency."

"I do not understand."

He reflected a moment, and then resolved upon a bold and perhaps risky course.

"Ah, I should have remembered that," said he, with a confiding and deeply-respectful air. "But that is no reason why you should not understand."

"About the—the Vanderpoer girl's secret history?" faltered Kitty, her woman's curiosity quickly coming to the fore.

"Yes; I am going to confide in you implicitly."

And he did so then and there.

The story included not only Zelda's history, as he had received it from her adoptive father, but also the romance of his own first acquaintance with her, two years previous, in the wilds of Mexico.

The show had been halted for repairs, after damaging tempests, between two large towns, and Zelda was visiting alone a large hacienda at the earnest request of its senior-proprietor's wife, who had admired her beauty at one of the performances. While there, she was carried off by bandits. Rescued from these by Griplock, who chanced to be animal and bird-collecting in the district, she had remained with his camp a fortnight before being restored to Mr. Vanderpoer; to whom an oath of secrecy, extracted from her while among the brigands, had forced her to maintain a reticence with regard to her brief but picturesque adventures.

But she had already lost her maiden heart to the now detective; who had joined the show only a month previous to the opening of our story, for the express purpose of being near to the object of his adoration.

CHAPTER X.

THE FLYING TRAPEZE.

SUCH was the story confided unreservedly to Kitty Isaacs, and with a trusting air that could not but flatter her self-love, even while proving the hopelessness of her theretofore engrossing passion for the detective.

It had already, as a matter of duty, been confided to Mr. Isaacs, the remaining show-master; and Griplock had calculated shrewdly in extending the confidence to the daughter.

Poor Kitty!

A showman's daughter—a humdrum equestrienne and trapeze-performer from her earliest youth, there had been little enough romance in her own life as compared with Zelda's past. But her nature was impulsively noble and womanly, and her heart in the right place.

"All that you tell me is most wonderful, Mr. Crimmins," said she. "So Zelda is of high birth and great expectations, the proof of which depends upon that missing silver casket and its contents. I should never have guessed it. But in what way can I help you?"

"The casket must be recovered. I have not a doubt that it is now in the possession of Leomeister, or of some of his minions, to whose door the murder of Mr. Vanderpoer must sooner or later be brought home."

"Nor can I have a doubt of it, after what you have told me," said the young woman. "And Leomeister's passion for Zelda must likewise have prompted the crime?"

"Undoubtedly."

"While the possession of these papers places her future at his disposal?"

"That is it."

"What can I do?"

"Help me to recover the papers."

"Willingly and earnestly, if you will tell me how. I am no favorite with Leomeister, whom I cannot endure."

"But your sister is, or imagines herself to be."

"I think not; a girlish infatuation, that is all."

"Kitty, it is more than that. Mildred met him to-night—a street appointment. One of his rings is even now on her finger."

He told her the particulars.

Kitty started and blushed—though not for herself.

It was her first knowledge of Mildred's infatuation having proceeded to such a dangerous pass.

"The man is a base, cool-blooded scoundrel!" she exclaimed, clinching her hands. "Zelda is his lode-star, and he would make a fool of poor Milly in the mean time?"

"Exactly."

"Mr. Crimmins, I will do anything—but *what* shall I do?"

"Protect your sister, and serve me, or rather Zelda, at the same time."

The girl bit her lip. One does not reconstruct an ill-governed fancy in an instant.

"Call it serving *you*," she said, in a low voice.

"Well and good; and with my profoundest gratitude."

He raised her hand to his lips with a respectful courtesy that could not be misinterpreted.

The young woman flushed with pleasure.

It was a courtesy to which her prosaic life was little accustomed, and she liked it.

"What am I to do?" she asked again.

"Set Mildred to discovering, for you and me, the casket's hiding-place."

"But how?"

"You ask that, with your exceptional woman's wit! Why, by exciting her jealousy of Zelda, as a matter of course."

"Ah!"

"To be sure! And this sentiment, if properly stimulated, can both make Mildred a shrewd questioner of Leomeister and put her more thoroughly on her guard against him."

Kitty held out her hand in all frankness and unselfishness.

"I understand," said she. "Trust in me, Mr. Crimmins; and good-night."

They separated, the detective making his way to his own hotel—this time without interruption—well satisfied at having made a faithful ally of one who might, with less skillful management, have become an embarrassing mainplot.

A fortnight later the show was exhibiting at a somewhat smaller town further west, in a rugged and mountainous region.

The remains of the murdered show-master had been followed to the grave, and for the world at large "the deep damnation of his taking off" was still an unguessed mystery.

It was the opening performance, and Zelda was flying around the sawdust circuit in her celebrated bareback equitation, to the delight of the applauding multitude.

Her adoptive father had been found to possess nothing but his half-interest in the show, and even this had been heavily mortgaged to Mr. Isaacs, for he had been a man of generous and improvident habits.

Zelda had been left sole legatee of the few thousands that had remained of a once fine fortune, with Mr. Isaacs as her executor and guardian.

But it was neither disappointment in this respect, nor in accordance with her new guardian's wish, that had prompted her return to her professional pursuit; for her income from what remained of the Vanderpoer interest in the show was more than sufficient, and Mr.

Isaacs would have advised her permanent retirement, notwithstanding that her performance was a telling card.

But Zelda Vanderpoer had always loved her profession.

She rode as naturally as the bird flies. Like *Dazzle* in the play, she might almost be said to have been born on horseback.

Moreover, it was only by a hasty return to her exercises that she found anything like relief from the cruel bereavement she had undergone, and which, but for her trustful and sustaining love of the Circus Detective, might have rendered her hopelessly melancholy.

Griplock, who had been disposing of a brace of pickpockets in the crowd, returned to the edge of the ring just as Mr. Isaacs, in the capacity of ring-master, Mr. Spezzi, the clown, and Mr. Leomeister, in all the glory of lion-taming fleshings and spangles, were elevating the paper-covered hoops through which the beautiful equestrienne was to flash like an incarnated arrow of light in her swift evolutions on the back of Black Sultan, the incomparable.

"Now at last, ladies and gentlemen," sung out the ring-master, in his most chirpy and amiable tones, "you are about to enjoy a treat with which all the crowned heads of Europe, not to mention those of Asia and Africa, have been duly delectated and entranced. Mademoiselle Zelda, the Love-Bird of Equitation and wonder of horsemanship, will vault through the balloons in her world-renowned and incomparable prize trick."

"Don't forget zat, leddies and shentlemens," echoed Clown Spezzi, one of whose stock comicallities was to butcher the English language a little more ruthlessly in public than elsewhere. "It is a treat in store for you, like ze soothing seerup of ze Madame Winslow, only with zis difference. It is ze men, and not ze children, vat cry for its repitizione; it is ze fair leddies and ze whole world vat it soothes into ze dream of paradise, and makes dem t'ink zat an angel, and not Mlle. Zelda at all, is on ze ving."

And, with a guffaw and a grimace, he turned a back somerset before finally settling on his pedestal and bringing his "balloon" into readiness.

Leomeister shimmered and smiled, but said nothing.

By a new contract, his side-show curiosities were included in the adjoining menagerie department, and he was also under engagement to do trapeze and other tricks in conjunction with the Peerless Air-Queens, Zoe and Haidee Pontawoski (the Isaacs sisters).

Then Zelda, who had been ambling restfully around the ring while sitting on her horse, suddenly sprung into her airy upright attitude.

The band struck up afresh, and then she was once more in full flight, as if fairly winged.

Leomeister was the last in line of the trio of hoop-bearers.

Flash, flash, flash! she went through the first set as airily as a swallow, rising and dropping with each undulation of the matchless steed beneath her in the most perfect rhythm.

Then flash, flash! again through the second set.

But upon rising exultingly to pass through the last, Leomeister's low, menacing voice, audible only to her ears, growled out with tigrish intensity.

"Beware! for I hold your fate in the hollow of my hand," came the rapid articulations. "Continue to avoid me, and you are lost!"

Zelda gave a sharp-like cry, faltered in her spring, and, though passing through the tissue-film, fell upon her knees, instead of her feet.

She was up again instantly, though flushing furiously, but she had none the less made a balk, and it cut her to the quick.

Griplock saw that something was wrong, and, beckoning to Mr. Isaacs, whispered in his ear, while riveting the apparently unconscious Leomeister with his peculiar eyes.

The result was that, when the next feature (banner-leaping) was in order, the glittering lion-tamer was not one of the six performers employed in manipulating the banners, and Zelda's entire performance closed with the customary *eclat*.

"What was it?" whispered the detective, as she was riding off. "Did that scoundrel dare to menace you?"

"No—yes—I hardly know," was the hurried reply. "Another time." And she had disappeared.

A short time afterward the trapeze act was in progress.

Hanging, head-downward, from a lofty bar, Conrad held between his teeth a loop from which depended a lighter bar, upon which the graceful and renowned Pontawoski Sisters (Kitty and Mildred) were performing a number of surprising tricks.

The performance was admirable, the applause great.

"Remember, Milly," whispered the elder girl. "You are to press him with the question at the next trick. You will then have him at your mercy."

"I'll do it," was the reply, but in no very determined tone.

"See that you do, or you will hopelessly lose

him to Zelda. By the secret of the silver casket alone can you defy her and master him."

"Never fear!"

There was determination enough now, and accompanied by an unpleasant gritting of Mildred's teeth.

Meanwhile, the up-gazing crowd would scarcely have suspected such an interchange between their admired Zoe and Haidee.

Attired in boyish, skin-tight costumes, gilded and bedizened; that set off their robust yet girlish proportions to the most charming advantage, with perpetual smiles and kissing of hands, the young women oscillated and scintillated in their various evolutions like veritable care-free creatures of the air.

The trick ended, and once more the three performers sat easily on the broad main trapeze bar, Leomeister in the center.

Then followed the most dangerous feature of the performance.

Conrad was stretched along the bar on his back, as if sleeping, with his ankles crossed, and his wrists *tightly bound* with a strap across his breast.

The bar was being violently swung back and forth by a line in the hands of Kitty, perched on a higher bar far below, and to one side.

The man's sole support in the course of the terrible test was the crotch formed by Mildred's two feet, in which the back of his head nestled firmly, as in a socket, she standing erect and looking straight down into his face, while holding on with both hands to a subsidiary bar crossing the trapeze higher up.

The trapeze was high up, almost in the very peak of the tent, fully sixty feet from the sawdust.

No netting intervened, as in more recent shows, to provide against an accidental fall, which could hardly fail of entailing a tragical, if not wholly fatal, result.

It was a specialty so fraught with generally-understood danger that the spectators invariably held their breaths, as they were doing now, during its continuance.

The trick was at its most critical pitch.

The main bar was making a great sweep from side to side, in the course of its rushing oscillations, and yet the Herculean male performer lay there his full length, calm, peacefully, image-like, as if glued or frozen along the bar.

Suddenly Mildred, in a strangely distinct voice that was, of course, audible to Leomeister alone, spoke.

"Conrad, do you love me?"

Something in her tone startled him, and his uneasiness was not diminished as, looking up into her face, their eyes met.

"You know I do," he replied.

"But swear it."

"Milly, what is this? I have sworn it repeatedly, I swear it again."

"Liar and perjurer! you love Zelda Vanderpoer."

"What! you believe those absurd stories?"

He felt the precariousness of his situation; there was an exasperated glitter in the eyes looking down into his.

"It is true. You strive to ingratiate yourself with her everywhere. To-night you said something to her, causing that miss at the last balloon."

"All false! I swear it, Milly!"

"Pish! Conrad, you are at my mercy. One proof of your good faith is wanting. Give it me, or, as I live, I shall withdraw my feet, and you will roll off the bar!"

He saw that she was pitiless.

"What do you demand?"

"The missing casket containing the proofs of Zelda's birth and fortune. Tell me where it is hidden."

He with difficulty maintained his balance and his composure.

"You are mad!" he exclaimed. "What do I know of the casket? Surely you cannot believe me a murderer?"

"That is not the question. The casket is in your possession. I must know where it is concealed."

"I shall not tell you."

"Then down you go!"

She even withdrew one foot, causing him to quiver like a leaf along the giddy bar.

"Mildred, for God's sake! Don't you see that I am helpless?"

"Of course I know that."

"I implore you put back your foot—I am already in peril!"

She did so.

"There you are! Now will you tell?"

"But, my dear girl, this is cruel—unfair—barbarous!"

"Don't 'dear girl' me till you have won back my regard. Where is the casket concealed?"

"But think. The secret would place my life at your mercy!"

"It is at my mercy now."

"But I mean henceforth for all time—through the future."

"So much the better. I shall hold your good-faith in leash, no less securely than the future of Zelda Vanderpoer."

He ground his teeth and groaned, when it suddenly—strange to say, for the first time—

occurred to him to cheat her with a false answer.

But the hope was of brief duration.

"Great booby!" she said; "I can read your thought. Try to deceive me at your peril!"

He muttered something confusedly; and then grew paler; her face was become frowningly impatient.

"The casket's hiding-place?" she repeated.

"I shall not ask you again."

"One thing first."

"What is it?"

"Your solemn promise to keep the secret inviolable as between us two."

"When the casket is in my possession—yes. Quick, your answer?"

"Good God! Are you so bent on this thing?"

For answer she made a muscular movement in her feet, as though to withdraw them.

"Hold on! For God's sake, don't do that! I yield."

"The hiding-place?"

"There is a false bottom to Purring Pedro's chest. The casket is there. Quick; unbuckle this strap."

She stooped to do so.

But hardly were Conrad's wrists released when, catching feebly at the air with them, as though they had become benumbed, he rolled off the bar, going down sidewise with a yell.

CHAPTER XI.

THE KNIFE AND THE CASKET.

BUT if Mildred had been responsible for the catastrophe, she was also mainly instrumental in averting it.

Terrified in the midst of her exultation, she had suddenly dropped from her foothold, clutching the bar under her armpit, and seizing the falling athlete by the hair of the head with her disengaged hand.

Then Kitty had hastily swarmed up the ropes with her assistance, so that, instead of completing his tumble, Conrad was enabled to avail himself of the next lower bar, terribly shaken up in the way of nerves, but physically undisturbed.

"We must rush the act," said he, kissing his hand to the sea of faces below, as if the averted accident had been wholly intentional. "The heart is almost knocked out of me."

His suggestion was followed.

As they came to earth together, the girls slipped off to the dressing-room, while Conrad darted for his side-show attractions, whose exhibition at the communicating entrance to the menagerie department was next on the programme.

Griplock was waiting just inside the green-room as the sisters passed.

"Successful!" whispered Kitty, who had already received the communication. "Secret surrendered!"

"Where is it hidden?"

"Under Pedro's chest, which has a false bottom." And she was gone.

Griplock darted through the crowd.

Leomeister, followed by his Man-Snake and Mermaid, was just leading the performing bear into the small roped inclosure reserved for them, while also carrying the chest, assisted by Mr. Spezzi, the clown.

Gaston Larue and Center-pole Jack, the former watchful as a hawk, the latter calmly indifferent, were hovering close behind, and Proprietor-Ringmaster Isaacs was not far off.

This was the occasion reserved by the Circus Detective for the knife-test, and both Isaacs and Larue were in that secret, though of course knowing nothing of the newly-flashed one.

The crowd was in good humor, and the diversion was soon under way for such as did not choose to wander off among the animal-cages.

Gogo was writhing, hissing, and glistening in and out of his artificial jungle with his customary success; Kalulah was shifting her green-spangled shapeliness and lazily blowing smoke-rings through the water from a cigarette at the bottom of her glass-sided tank, while Leomeister, still looking disturbed—much to Griplock's satisfaction—was putting the bear through his stock tricks.

"Pedro is a good bear, ladies and gentlemen, and he's just as wise as he is playful," the side-showman called out, in his sing-song voice. "He is a Russian by birth, from a rock-cradle in the bosom of the Ural Mountains, and he can be either a loyal Russian or a Nihilist on occasion, according as the cat jumps. He obtained his sobriquet, Purring Pedro, from the White Czar himself, by reason of his amiability. You can hear him purring at this moment. Here, Pedro, take a drink, and then come down and show us your box of playthings."

During this harangue, and more of it, Pedro was grinningly revolving on the top of his climbing-pole.

He caught a cleverly-tossed bottle of beer on the fly, uncorked and drained its contents with comical gusto, and then came waddling down to the edge of the chest, which his master had just opened.

Then came the best part of Purring Pedro's programme.

He turned the chest upside down, and revealed

in its multifarious contents, to the unbounded delight of the juvenile spectators especially.

A scarlet coat was donned, then a liberty cap with a blue tassel, and then a pair of enormous cavalry boots.

A pair of cymbals were clashed with amusing discordance; his attempt to blow a tin trumpet was less successful, but equally entertaining, and finally, after numerous stock tricks, he began to toss up his varied toys, together with whatever might be contributed by the onlookers—such as oranges, bags of peanuts, sticks of candy, and what not—after the manner of juggling balls, usually ending by tossing the articles, when edible, down his capacious throat, though beer was his special craving, and for which he was constantly on the "purr."

"There's no other bear like Pedro—never was and never will be," intoned Conrad afresh. "Mark the human-like intelligence of the creature. Mark the discrimination he displays in his guileless pastimes. How intuitively he knows an orange from an oyster, a handkerchief from a doughnut, a glass ball from a glass bottle, a—a—a—"

The exhibitor had come to a confused pause, while Center-pole Jack was leaning forward, startled out of his customary stolidity.

"A sleigh-bell from a blood-stained clasp-knife," supplemented Griplock Crimmins, in a loud and mocking voice. "Why do you falter in the list of Pedro's accomplishments, Mr. Leomeister? See, the brute is tasting the blood on the knife, as though he recognized it. Truly, an almost human intelligence. Whose blood can it be?"

There was an instant sensation, though one but little understood by the general spectators.

Pedro had, indeed, come to a puzzled pause, with the fatal knife (cleverly inserted among the playthings a moment previously by the detective himself) at his lips, and was now licking the discolored blade with a series of low growls, entirely at variance with his whilom good-humored whines.

Then he suddenly began tossing it from one paw to the other.

Gogo and Kalulah had also marked the interruption.

The former had forgotten to dart his red tongue in and out, and his greenish eyes were bulging out from under the scaly skin that enveloped him to the brows.

The Girl-Fish, with the water dripping from her hair, was leaning over the edge of her tank with a livid face.

Suddenly Center-pole Jack, his dark face expressive rather of astonishment than guilt, advanced with outstretched hand toward the knife.

"No you don't!" shouted the detective, forestalling the intention. "The knife—Pedro's novel plaything—is mine for the present. Let him or those who first dyed it with a murder-stain claim it at the proper place—under the shadow of the hangman's rope!"

The sensation had redoubled, but Leomeister had by this time partly recovered his self-control.

He made a gesture of indifference as the detective repossessed himself of the knife and slipped it out of sight.

"Consider it all in the performance, ladies and gentlemen," he sung out, disdainfully. "Our detective officer would contest the palm of buffoonery with Purring Pedro. It is for you to judge. This performance is at an end."

He hustled the bear to one side, and began to throw the loose articles back into their receptacle with trembling haste.

Griplock drew Isaacs apart.

"Don't let him make off with the chest," he whispered. "It contains the casket underneath a false bottom."

Mr. Isaacs understood.

He took Leomeister persuasively by the arm.

"Come, professor," said he, smiling. "Your fame has gone before you. Ladies are present who crave a sight of your masterful presence in Othmar's cage."

Leomeister would have protested, but a number of ladies, overhearing the words, did start forward admiringly at that moment.

He was led away, while Griplock, Gaston and Spezzi, rudely brushing Center-pole Jack to one side, snatched up the chest and made off with it to the little side-show tent.

Gogo and Kalulah came hurrying after them, to seek the retirement of their dressing-rooms, and the Gypsy brought up the rear with the dancing bear in leading.

It was an afternoon performance; and, as they entered the smaller interior, there came a roll of thunder, indicating that a storm was threatening.

"Vincent, we can dispense with your presence."

The words were angrily addressed by Griplock to Center-pole Jack, who had lingered after chaining up the bear, while the three others were bending over the now reopened chest.

Without replying in words, the Gypsy calmly folded his arms over his massive chest, and smiled.

The detective's lips tightened, but it was neither time nor place for an altercation.

"You insist on remaining?" said he.
 "For the present, Mr. Crimmins, yes."
 The answer was respectful, but firm.
 "Why?" was the next query.
 "To know about my clasp-knife being in your possession, sir."

"What would you know about it?"
 "How it came in your possession; that is all. It was either lost or stolen from me two or three weeks ago; I desire its return."

The detective was somewhat staggered by the man's quiet self-possession, as were also Gaston and Spezzi, who were into the secret of the knife.

"You are sure the knife is yours?"
 "Very sure, sir. My initials, J. V., will appear on the handle."

"Granted. Was the knife blood-stained, as now, when last seen in your possession?"

"Its blade was bright and undimmed, sir. But, I noted that it has since become discolored."

"It is the discoloration of blood."

"You surprise me, sir."

"You do look surprised."

"Why should I not? But I will trouble you, sir, for the return of my property."

"This knife?" And Griplock again produced it.

"Certainly. 'Tis my own."

"Why, man alive! don't you know that Mr. Vanderpoer was murdered with it?"

The Gypsy's amazement seemed to be too absolute for simulation.

His jaw fell, his eyes fairly popping out of his head.

"Good God!" he gasped; "you surely don't mean it?"

The detective nodded, and again put the weapon out of sight.

Gogo and Kalulah, having changed their costumes, were looking on from their dressing-room entrances, composed and alert.

"You will readily understand, Center-pole," said Griplock, "why I intend to freeze on to the knife. Stay where you are, if you choose. You shall witness the discovery of another clew to the murderer of Mr. Vanderpoer."

"Another clew?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"A silver casket, containing valuable papers, that disappeared with the assassin."

"And where shall you find it?"

"In the double-bottom with which this chest is provided."

"When with my brethren, sir, I am a king among my tribe. By the traditions of my wild sovereignty, I swear that your success in tracing home that foul murder to its fiendish perpetrator is the dearest wish of my soul!"

His dark eyes flashed, and there was a surprising dignity in such words, coming with fervor and eloquence from the customarily reticent and moody man.

At a sign from Griplock, the secretary and the clown overturned the contents of the chest.

Then a sounding of the latter's bottom made the secret of its construction sufficiently evident.

The connecting spring was soon found, a pressure caused the lid to fly up, and the secret compartment was discovered to be—empty.

There was a giggle from Kalulah, a hissing laugh from Gogo, profound disappointment on the part of Gaston and Spezzi, a ghost of a smile under the Gypsy's mustache.

As for Griplock, for the moment he was beside himself with rage.

"Tricked! forestalled!" he hoarsely exclaimed.

"See; the casket must have been here until recently. There is its impression on the dusty board. But wait. Curse it all! There may be yet another false bottom beneath."

And, snatching up a heavy tent-pin-driver that happened to be at hand, he demolished the chest on the spot.

But its only secret had been exposed—the casket was still a missing clew.

A low, taunting laugh broke the renewed hush of disappointment that followed.

Leomeister was looking in with an exultant face.

At his side were Mr. Isaacs, Kitty and Mildred, the two former reflecting the general disappointment, Mildred with a half-resentful, half-terrified look.

CHAPTER XII.

A MOMENTOUS STORM.

BEHIND the new-comers, in the great interiors, the spectators were dispersing or lingering in unwonted confusion and no little dismay.

The air had darkened, thunder was bursting overhead, the rain could be heard descending in torrents, and the canvas was flapping and swaying in the fierce gusts, whose howls were loud above the whining cries of the animals, excited and restless in their confinement.

With a single contemptuous glance at Mildred, who seemed utterly crushed by it, Leomeister strode into the side-tent.

"Really, Mr. Crimmins," said he, with mock concern, "I can't understand why you should have ruined my bear's play-box, but I suppose you are good for the damage."

And he passed on to his dressing-room, in

company with Center-pole Jack, to whom he had made a sign.

Unperceived by them or the rest, Gaston Larue slipped after them, concealing himself in a convenient nook.

A mere glance had convinced Mr. Isaacs of the failure of the search, but he was just now too concerned for the safety of the tents to think of anything else.

He was bustling here and there, giving orders to his subordinates, the detective and Spezzi being similarly employed in his company.

"Bless me, what a gale!" exclaimed the show-master. "All hands, there, attend to hurrying the spectators away. If the canvas should come down there might be serious accidents. Girls, find Zelda, and be off for home, all of you!"

The last words were spoken to his daughters, who had long before resumed their street attire. Mildred answered vaguely, like one in a dream.

She was still writhing under Leomeister's contempt, for which she held her sister responsible, now that she knew the use that would have been made of Leomeister's forced confession as to the whereabouts of the casket.

"I don't believe Zelda is dressed yet," Kitty made reply.

"Not dressed!" exclaimed Isaacs. "Why, it is nearly an hour since she rode off."

"I only know, papa," said Kitty, "that she was just beginning to change her costume when I peeped into her dressing-room ten minutes ago."

Here there was an unusual gust, which shook the canvas violently.

"Hasten to her," cried the show-master, peremptorily. "Bid her to dally no longer. The dressing-rooms are the frailest corner of the big tent. Go along, both of you." And, with that he hurried away.

Several of the larger cages, including Othmar's, backed upon the private passage leading to the line of separated dressing-rooms, and also upon one wall of the side-show tent, while beyond was the large general, or green room, the horse stalls being yet beyond that.

As the two girls slipped along this private passage, Griplock, with a suddenly conceived anxiety on Zelda's account, hurried after them, though with some natural hesitation.

A step behind caused him to look back, and perceive Spezzi also following.

The latter had absently donned a plug hat on top of his clown's coxcomb, a linen duster over his motley wear, and was the picture of grotesque solicitude.

"This is no place for you, signor," said the detective, a little sharply. "Men are not permitted in here, save at the break-up."

The canvas wall heaved violently, and the ex-ring-master narrowly escaped being thrust against Othmar's claws and those of a particularly fierce tiger in the adjoining cage.

"Santo Marco!" he responded; why then are you here, my friend?"

"I? Well—oh—I am concerned about Miss Zelda."

"And I am concerned about Mees Kitty. She is my guiding-star, my light-house, my adored Lamp!"

"But Miss Kitty is thoroughly able to look out for herself, while—"

He was interrupted by a yet fiercer blast, a crash of thunder, a play of blinding gleams; then there was a ripping sound, a horse's tramp, a man's hoarse voice, and finally a woman's cry.

Zelda's voice!

But at that instant the detective was partly enveloped in the folds of the overturned partition wall, while Kitty's voice screamed out:

"Help, help! she is being carried off!"

Simultaneously there was a dolorous wail from Signor Spezzi.

The scene taken in just then by the embarrassed detective almost defies description.

Gogo, who had perhaps assisted the wind in overturning the partition canvas, was looking over its ruins with a hideous grin.

Kalulah was at his side, her hair tossing out in the wind and rain, her hands clasped in real or pretended alarm.

Plastered, back foremost, against the side-ending bars of the two cages, was the unfortunate Mr. Spezzi, pawing the air in a wild attempt to struggle out of Othmar's clutch on one side and the tiger's on the other.

"Relieve me, Mr. Griplock, relieve me!" he sputtered, in his worst English. "*Corpo di Bacchio!* let not Mees Kitty see me in zis undignified position."

But this was more easily said than done, for the detective could with difficulty free himself, and just beyond, over the green-room and stables inclosure, the tent-cloths were snapping into ribbons.

However, he managed to release the unfortunate signor, but only at the expense of the latter's trowsers-seat, which was left in the frantic lion's clutch.

Then Kitty's cry was repeated, and they both sprung forward through the flying debris and the pouring rain.

They were too late.

Leomeister, easily recognized, in spite of a

voluminous horseman's cloak, was just spurring away on Black Sultan's back, with the half-fainting Zelda in his arms.

"Save me, Griplock!" she feebly cried. "He is taking me to the mountains. Save me!"

But the detective was at that instant struck back by a storm-whirled tent-stake—or was it treacherously thrown by Gogo? The truth was never known—while the signor was too overcome by the condition of his trowsers to think of anything else.

The abductor scornfully waved his hand, spurred over the ruins of the stable canvas at a bound, and disappeared amid the tempest and the gloom.

This was the only section of the tents that had actually given way.

When Mr. Isaacs came hurrying upon the scene, accompanied by a crowd of show-hands, a moment later, a scene of indescribable confusion was presented.

The stables and dressing-rooms were in ruins, the sport of the gale.

Kitty was panic-stricken, Mildred white to the lips, but indignant.

The Man-Snake and the Mermaid had likewise become tangled up in the canvas ruin, and were struggling in vain to extricate themselves.

Signor Spezzi, minus his duster, but with the plug hat crushed down over the coxcomb to his ears, was grasping the place where the seat of his trowsers ought to be with one hand, his waistband with the other, and was executing a frantic *pas seul* in the effort to present a still heroic front to "Mees Kitty's" regard.

Griplock, pale, and with a slight streak of blood along his face, was still reeling from the blow of the flying stake.

Added to this, the winds and the animals were shrieking in concert, the lightning continued to flare, the thunder to crash, and the rain to pour down.

In a word or two, Griplock explained the situation.

The show-master threw up his hands in momentary bewilderment.

"By Jupiter! misfortunes never come singly," he exclaimed. "The newest tent-corner in ribbons, the stock wardrobes ruined, and Zelda carried off by that infernal scoundrel, into the bargain! But wait; perhaps he has merely taken her to the hotel. It is a long distance, and there was no carriage."

Mildred looked up with a gleam of hopefulness.

"That must have been Conrad's intention!" she exclaimed. "I am sure of it!"

"Ridiculous!" cried Kitty. "To a hotel and on Black Sultan? Besides, didn't Zelda call out that she was being carried off to the mountains?"

"Zelda is excitable," persisted Milly. "She may have only fancied it."

"Oh, yes; very likely, of course! Mr. Spezzi, do run over the broken tent-line there, and see if you can espy a hackney coach."

Spezzi obeyed with embarrassed eagerness, but without running, inasmuch as politeness compelled him to imitate the crab by going backward, to his no small discomfort and the amused wonder of the young woman.

"Whatever is the matter with Mr. Spezzi?" she inquired. "Has he got the colic, or is he gone crazy?"

The detective was too generous to explain, and the unfortunate signor managed to effect his evanishment.

A public carriage, dispatched by him, arrived a few moments later, when the sisters were incontinently bundled in it by their father, with orders to lose no time in seeking the hotel, and ascertaining if Zelda had been taken there.

"Telegraph me here of the result," was his parting injunction as they were driven away.

The show-hands now having got to work on the wreck, the detective hurriedly drew the show-master apart.

"What is this insanity about Zelda having been carried to the hotel?" he exclaimed, impatiently. "Surely you don't take any stock in it?"

"Let us wait and see," said Mr. Isaacs, pointing to a horseman, covered with mud and water, who was just reining up at the boundary.

It was Leomeister on Black Sultan.

Both men sprung toward him.

"What have you done with Zelda?" cried the show-master, for Griplock could not trust himself to speak.

"Carried her to her hotel, of course," was the cool reply, as Conrad dismounted. "What else would I do with a swooning young lady in such a rain?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LION-TAMER'S RUSE.

WITHOUT another word, and as if he had performed only a common-place courtesy, the lion-tamer led Black Sultan to a shelter, and then, relieving his curiosities, Gogo, Kalulah and the bear from the ruins of the small tent, took himself off with them.

They were understood to be putting up, after their custom, at an obscure hotel in a distant suburb of the town.

"I don't like it," muttered the detective. "It is all very mysterious and outlandish."

"What is?" asked the showman.

"This quixotic essay on his part, with Zelda's submission to it. It isn't natural-like. And then there were Zelda's words about his carrying her off to the mountains."

"It does seem odd; but we ought soon to hear from my girls as to how the matter stands. See; the storm is letting up. Let us hurry up these repairs, after which there will be nothing to prevent our hastening to the hotel ourselves."

But at this juncture there was a muffled call, and they detected a struggling movement under the prostrated canvas of the side-show.

It proved to be Gaston Larue entrapped therein.

He was dragged out in a half-smothered condition, but the rain, falling on his pale, delicate face, speedily revived him.

He seemed gratified to find himself with Mr. Isaacs and the detective.

"The pole must have struck me down; I am still a little confused," said he, after thanking them for their timely assistance. "I am coming all right again, however."

"How did you happen to be in there?" demanded Mr. Isaacs, with a good deal of curiosity.

"I was at the door of Leomeister's dressing-room."

"Aha!"

"Yes, sir. I thought it might be well to know what had become of the casket, after its last mysterious disappearance."

Here Griplock pricked up his ears.

"I should say so!" exclaimed Isaacs. "Whose talk did you overhear in the dressing-room, Gaston?"

"Leomeister's and Center-pole Jack's."

"And was it to the point?"

"It was."

Here the detective, with a deferential gesture, took up the questioning.

"Were we acting on genuine information?" said he. *Had the casket been in the chest's false bottom?*

"Yes; until within five minutes of our search—perhaps even less time."

"How had it disappeared?"

"Gogo abstracted it."

"But the chest wasn't out of our possession an instant after the public trick-showing with its contents."

"I only know what I gathered from Conrad's words to the Gypsy."

Griplock slapped his thigh.

"I have it! but you are wrong as to time. The casket could not have been in the chest after the trick-showing began. Conrad must have caused its abstraction instantly after his descent from the trapeze—directly after Mildred had forced the secret from him, to be passed on to me by Kitty."

"Yes, sir."

"Where is the casket now?"

"In a center-pole."

"In a center-pole?"

"Yes, in one of the large poles belonging to the main tent."

"But how can it be in a pole?"

"There is a secret receptacle let into one of them, near the base."

"Some of the big poles have that provision," put in Mr. Isaacs.

"You heard Leomeister admit this?" continued the detective.

"Yes; Gogo had made the change."

"Had Center-pole Jack been made aware of it?"

"I think not. He looked greatly astonished, and had hardly a word to say, one way or the other."

"How did their colloquy terminate?"

"Conrad had slipped on his every-day clothes, together with a great riding-coat. Then, after whispering together, they separated, leaving the tent by different ways. I was about to follow, when a fierce blast of the storm upset the stake I had been leaning against, causing me to fall. By the time I had scrambled to my feet the tempest was at its height. The tent went to pieces; something struck me down again. I was unconscious till but a few moments back."

"You are a good fellow, Gaston. Come, let us investigate the center-poles. This is a good time for it, though I *would* like to be assured of Zelda's safety first."

"That assurance may come at any moment," said the show-master.

He was right about it.

On their way to investigate the center-poles, they were rejoined by Signor Spezzi, who had managed to visit the ruins of his dressing-room, to the manifest improvement of his personal appearance.

Then they were overtaken by a messenger, with the following dispatch for Mr. Isaacs from Kitty:

"Zelda all right, and locked in her own room, but Milly in hysterics. Come to hotel soon as possible."

"That settles it," said Mr. Isaacs, after passing the dispatch to his companions. "Hysterics seldom kill, and Zelda is safe. Which pole could have been meant, think you, Gaston?"

There are three main or center-poles used in a canvas structure of the size of the Universal's show-tent, and they were now among these, the vast interior being wholly deserted.

"I haven't the least idea," was the reply. "But, now I think of it, Conrad mentioned that a cross had been scratched with a nail on the door of the receptacle."

Only one of the great poles standing proved to have any 'pocket' at all.

Its lid, or little door, bore no such mark, and moreover, it was found to contain only a greasy wrench and some rusty screws.

"There are three spare poles," said Mr. Isaacs. "Let us examine them."

They proceeded to the space allotted to the show-wagons, but found them tangled up in the fallen roof of their sheltering tent, while there was still enough of the tempest remaining to cause discomfort.

Several of the tent-hands, dripping wet and out of humor, were trying to set things to rights.

"Where is Vincent?" demanded Mr. Isaacs, angrily. "Why is he not directing you?"

But Center-pole Jack had not shown up for duty since the damage began, and might be senseless or dead beneath some of the debris, for all that his subordinates knew to the contrary.

Gypsy Frank had been seriously injured, Irish Mahmoud was nursing a sore head, and there had been other casualties.

Guided by one of the men, the party made their way under the fallen canvas to a large wagon (Vincent's specialty while on the road) in which the spare poles were stowed away in sections.

There, with the aid of lanterns, they began to examine the base-ends of the poles, all of which chanced to be provided with the cubby-hole pockets.

The lid of the second one examined, betrayed a faint cross scratched across the blue paint; but this was locked in such a manner that not one of the master keys on Mr. Isaacs's key-ring would open it.

Instantly all were trembling eagerness.

It was a good-deal like being in a cave, and a very low-roofed one at that; a sort of wilderness of wagon-wheels and wagon bodies, with the heavy canvas tumbled down tumultuously over their heads, and the lanterns burned dimly in the confined air, lighting up the excited faces of the searchers with a weird effect.

"The deuce take it!" growled the show-master, after having successively tried every key in vain. "This lock must have been doctored for the occasion. Find me a hammer, some one."

A small hammer was found under one of the wagon-seats, and handed over.

It was not heavy enough to break the pocket-lid, but at the first stroke there was evoked a metallic rattle from within the receptacle that increased the eagerness of all hands to fever heat.

Griplock had returned from a short foray with a heavier hammer.

"Please stand aside, sir, and let me have a crack at it," said he. "Who's burning matches around here? Smells like it, any way. Here goes!"

Room having been made for him, he struck the lid of the pole-pocket a resounding whack, that started it from its hinges.

But the deciding blow was not delivered.

There was a puff of sulphur smoke from somewhere under the wagon, then an explosion, not very serious, but strong enough to send every one reeling back by the force of its concussion, while all the lanterns were extinguished, and the place filled with smoke.

By the dim light that remained, there was caught a silvery gleam in the thick air, then a low laugh, and then the light patter of retreating footsteps.

The lanterns were quickly relighted.

But the lid of the pole-pocket was found to be open, the receptacle empty.

"Foiled again!" growled the detective, fairly gnashing his teeth. "The scoundrels! they must have the devil himself on their side."

"It can't be helped," said Mr. Isaacs, with a sigh. "Let us get out of this. I am half stifled."

Gaston and Spezzi, however, lingered behind to investigate the cause of the explosion.

The remains of a large paper torpedo, such as are sometimes used in circus performances representing brigand engagements, were found under the wagon, and that was all.

The group were no sooner together again in the open air than a second dispatch was handed to the show-master.

This one was from Mrs. Isaacs, urging him to hasten to the hotel, with a hint that something mysterious was in the air.

He at once took a conveyance, accompanied by Griplock, Spezzi and Gaston, all of whom were quartered at the same hotel.

Arriving there at about dusk they were met by Mrs. Isaacs and Kitty, with troubled faces. The former undertook to explain.

Mildred had got over her hysterics, during which her passion for Leomeister, no less than

her jealousy of Zelda, had been made painfully apparent.

She was still raving, however, and demanding that Zelda be confronted with her, to set at rest her suspicions, which had been duly scouted as unjust and preposterous by both her mother and sister.

But Zelda had gone straight to her room, directly after being brought to the hotel by Leomeister on Black Sultan, and nothing could induce her to open her door, or even to reply to the women's entreaties, though she could be distinctly heard moving about in the room.

"This is very remarkable," said Mr. Isaacs. "Zelda is not wont to act so unreasonably. Perhaps she, also, is greatly upset."

"No," said Mrs. Isaacs. "I saw her running up directly after being landed at the private entrance by Leomeister. Her step was strong and assured."

"But did she look pale, or in any way discomposed?"

Mrs. Isaacs had to confess that she had not seen the girl's face, which had been muffled in the hood of her rubber waterproof.

"Something wrong!" exclaimed Griplock. "Zelda wore no waterproof when she was being carried off. I'd swear to it."

"So would I," corroborated Spezzi.

Mr. Isaacs looked grave, and, at his suggestion, the entire party proceeded to the door of Zelda's room, on the next floor above.

The show-master knocked, and spoke the young woman's name with his customary kindness.

No answer was returned, but there was a rustle, as if the inmate had crossed the floor, and was hesitating.

"Zelda, I must see you instantly!" Mr. Isaacs called out, more peremptorily. "Do you not hear my demand?"

"Yes, sir," was at last replied, in a scarcely audible voice.

"Do as I request you, then. I must see you this instant."

There was a hesitating pause.

Then the door was suddenly thrown open, and the inmates of the room confronted them.

Everybody started back in supreme astonishment.

CHAPTER XIV.

NESTA.

THE young woman thus revealed in the door of Zelda's room was not Zelda at all, but a perfect stranger.

A young and comely one, it is true, with a figure much resembling the missing girl's, but that was all.

She was a handsome girl of twenty, with jet-black hair and eyes, a clear, olive complexion, a certain bold composure of bearing, and her attire was a picturesque, rather bizarre conglomeration of once-bright colors that had become faded and worn.

Mrs. Isaacs and Kitty were the first to recover from their surprise.

"Who are you?" demanded the former.

The stranger courtesied and smiled.

"Nesta Vincent, at your service, madam," she replied.

"What are you?"

"A princess." This, with a good-deal of mock dignity.

"A princess, indeed!"

"Yes, madam," with a charming laugh, of my own people—a Gypsy tribe."

"Oh!"

"Yes, please."

"But how came you here?"

"On horseback, in the lion-tamer's arms."

"From where?"

"From a point midway between this place and the circus grounds."

"Do you know Zelda?"

"I saw a girl whom he addressed by that name."

"Please explain."

"Certainly, ma'm. It was when she was made to take my place in a Gypsy-cart, driven by my cousin, Black Jago, while I was transferred to Leomeister's charge."

The cunning and forethought of Zelda's abduction was now apparent.

Mrs. Isaacs's eyes snapped furiously, Kitty was indignant, the men were crestfallen.

"Infamous woman!" cried Kitty. "You acknowledge your share in this cowardly plot to abduct an unsuspecting young lady?"

"No bad names, please! Yes, Mistress Good-Looks, I acknowledge it."

"Where has Zelda been carried to?"

"To the mountains."

"But whereabouts in the mountains?"

"Question no further, and you will be told no lies. But one thing there is that I will tell you, pretty one, if you wish."

"What is that?"

Nesta laughed, and then drew down the corners of her mouth.

"Your fortune, if you but cross my palm," said she, demurely. "It's master-spirit is not far away." And she glanced shrewdly at Spezzi's eager face, which at once grew red and pleased.

"No, thank you!" cried Kitty, angrily.

Nesta gave a little shrug of her shapely shoulders, and, calmly turning into the room, began to resume her rubber water-proof.

"You're not going to desert us, young lady," said the show-master. "We should be incon-solable. Gaston, pray go for a policeman."

The Gypsy laughed again, her white teeth flashing through her red lips charmingly.

Then she indifferently sunk into a chair, while Gaston started upon his errand.

But the Circus Detective intercepted him by a sign, and then drew Mr. Isaacs apart.

"What course would you pursue, sir?" he asked.

"Zounds! Have the bold wench juggled forth-with, as a matter of course, and then get on the track of the kidnappers and their victim."

"But how, if this girl is as cool a card as she certainly seems to be?"

"She shall be made to speak."

"Easier said than done."

The show-master scratched his head.

"What would you propose?" he asked.

"This:—Keep the girl a prisoner where she is. Spezzi and Gaston will stand guard. Then let her effect her escape. I shall arrange that, and will be prepared to shadow her. Don't you catch on?"

"Now I do. Griplock, your head is the longest. It shall be done."

The first order was therefore reconsidered, and the two men set to guard the entrance, Nesta making not the slightest objection on being impressed with the arrangement for her safe-keeping.

"Wait!" said the show-master, as she was about to close the door. "A word or two, if you please."

She smiled and courtesied.

"Why not? Do you want your fortune told, sir?"

"Thanks—some other day. Your name, you say, is Nesta Vincent?"

"It is the best I have, sir. Some, indeed—gentlemen especially—find it musical."

"Are you related to my chief tent-man, John Vincent, commonly called Center-pole Jack?"

She manifested an amazement, seemingly altogether too sudden to be feigned.

"He is my brother!" she cried, eagerly. "We have not met for long years! What! he is here—near at hand—with you?"

Mr. Isaacs eyed her narrowly, bowed, and retired, the men on guard being alone left behind at the door.

"What did you think of that?" asked Mr. Isaacs of Griplock, when they were again alone.

"I am undetermined, as yet," was the reply.

"The young woman was either truthful in that response of hers, or she is the cleverest actress I ever saw."

Owing to the continuance of the rain and the damage to the tents, there was no performance that night.

Soon after the evening repast, when the show-master and the detective were still at table, in the former's private dining-room, over their cigars, Center-pole Jack made his appearance, to say that the repairs were completed.

He was haggard-looking, and carried his left arm in a sling.

"Where were you, Vincent, directly following the smash-up?" said Mr. Isaacs. "I was looking for you everywhere."

"Senseless under the stable-tent, sir," said the man, quietly. "The boys got me out right after you had gone. Jim told me about the explosion among the wagons."

"Can you explain that?"

"I cannot, sir. I might have shared in it, but for the tent coming down."

"How was that?"

"I had been talking with Conrad in his dressing-room—or rather listening to him, for he was doing all the talking."

"So."

"Yes, sir. Then, after we separated, I was making my way to the wagons when the tent blew in."

"Something has happened. You will excuse me if I question you closely?"

"Good enough, sir. Fire ahead!"

"What was your object among the wagons?"

There was a reflective pause, after which the man spoke out, with every appearance of frankness.

"I will tell you, sir," said he. "Leomeister was fool enough to make a confidant of me, and I was on my way to the wagons to cut him out."

"How?"

"You know what you were seeking so sharply in the false bottom of Purring Pedro's chest—some sort of pocketbook, wasn't it, with valuable papers?"

"Yes; but a silver pocketbook—a sort of cassette."

"Well, Leomeister confided to me that Gogo had hidden it afresh, in one of the cubby-holes of the spare center-poles."

"Well?"

"Well, sir, I was on my way to the wagons to get possession of it."

"For what purpose?"

"To make it over to you; since it struck me

as evident that it wasn't rightfully Conrad's property."

"An excellent intention. But why should Leomeister have made a confidant of such an honest man as you?"

The answer was the only one that did not fit well with the apparent ingenuousness of Vincent's words and manner.

"I really don't know," said he. "That same thing has occurred to me. But then Conrad always has sort of cottoned to me, though I can't say I admire him, in return. Besides not being on the square, he blusters too much for my taste."

"That will do, Vincent. Thanks for your good intentions. By the way, have you a sister named Nesta?"

The Gypsy man's astonishment was no less marked than the Gypsy girl's.

"Bless me, sir! know you aught of her?" he exclaimed, his dark face lighting up. "I had a sister so named, but whether alive or dead I have not known for years."

"You have, then, long been separated from her?"

"The little Nesta! Why, it is fifteen years since I left her with the tribe among the Yorkshire moors—I killed a man—not a Gypsy—in a prize-fight, and had to run for it. But it was hard lines—that parting with the little Nesta. I beseech you, Mr. Isaacs, not to keep me in the dark, if you know aught of her!"

"I will let you know to-morrow. Wait yet a moment. After Leomeister had reposed this confidence in you, did he not intrust you with yet another secret?"

"No, sir."

"Nothing about his intention to carry off Miss Zelda?"

"Not he! He wouldn't have dared. But what is this, sir? Has Miss Zelda come to fresh misfortunes?"

"Let us hope not." And Center-pole Jack was forthwith sent on his way.

Before they could comment on what he had said, Mr. Spezzi entered, to say that the upstairs prisoner had probably gone to bed, after disposing of a hearty dinner that had been sent up to her, and that Gaston was still on guard.

"Well," said Mr. Isaacs, who had imbibed the details of Griplock's plan, "arrange it between you so that she shall be guarded until, say, midnight. After that, you can manage to conveniently slumber on your post."

Spezzi looked quickly from one to the other.

"Aha!" said he; "is zat ze leetle game?"

A nod was his answer, and he took himself off, with a longing look at the door communicating with the adjoining room, in which he rightly surmised that 'Miss Kitty' might be sitting with her mother.

"What do you think of Vincent?" was Mr. Isaacs's first query when the two men were once more alone.

"He is a puzzle as yet," said Griplock. "We must wait—wait and sift, and consider, and compare." And he arose, putting on his hat.

"Where are you going?"

"To see what has become of Leomeister and Company."

"That is well. You know where they are quartered?"

"Yes; a rough little tavern on the mountain road, just out of town. I shall ride."

"Do so, by all means. A livery stable is close at hand. And you wish me to remain on the watch, just as you advised?"

"If you will do so."

"With all my heart. This infernal mystery has got to be cleared up, cost what it may. When shall I expect you back?"

"In an hour, at the latest."

"Good luck!"

Griplock was soon clattering through the rainy streets in a hired buggy, with a man to drive, besides showing him the way.

They reached the Eagle Inn, their destination in due season.

It was situated at a point where the town highway was merged into a wild, rocky road, at one side of which, at the edge of a steep, unprotected embankment, a considerable water-course, swollen by the rain, rushed away, taking its course toward the mountains, with great fury and clamor.

But the detective reached the tavern only to be informed that Leomeister had taken himself off with his curiosities hours before, but in what direction or with what intentions the landlord would not or could not say.

Griplock had expected as much, though wishing to make certain of the fact.

"It is all right," said he, climbing back into the buggy. "Let us return."

The man who had driven him was a burly, powerful fellow, with his face almost wholly concealed by the high rubber-coat collar.

"Would you mind my going inside for a drink, sir?" said he, touching his glazed hat.

The detective assented, and took the lines as the man got down, placing one hand on the horse's crupper as he did so.

Almost instantly after that, the animal, which had been unobjectionable up to that point, became little short of unmanageable.

By the time the jockey had returned from visiting the tap-room, the horse was rearing and plunging in a dangerous way.

"What did you do to him?" called out the detective angrily. "He was all right till you put your hand on him."

"I, sir?" said the man, taking him by the bits. "Nothing at all, sir. He sometimes has these fits. Loosen up a little, sir, while I keep him by the head. I'll cramp the wagon round, and be with you in a jiffy. Easy now, sir! It's powerful dangerous just here."

"I should say it was. Be cautious, now. Hold on, hold on! What are you doing?"

But it was too late.

The horse's head was suddenly let go at the critical moment, while the pseudo-stableman, snatching the whip from its socket, cut the creature across the flanks.

Horse, vehicle and inmate disappeared down the bank, into the raging torrent.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE TORRENT'S CLUTCH.

"HA, ha, ha!" laughed a taunting voice—Leomeister's voice—as the catastrophe was effected. "Good-night, Mr. Crimmins! perhaps your renowned griplock will save you now."

Griplock heard and recognized it—recognized how utterly his enemy, in the personality of the sham driver, had again duped him—even as he was being whirled away down the swollen stream, amid the wreck of the vehicle, in the darkness and the rain.

He was only conscious of the roar of the flood and the fierce struggles of the swimming horse.

The buggy was afloat, and he was still seated in it, but with the water over his legs.

Presently, when he judged that he had been carried thus for the greater part of a mile, something brushed his brow.

It was the wet foliage of an overhanging bough.

Another touched him. He seized it, clutched the connecting limb, swung himself free, and landed on a low bank.

A light twinkled before his dazed eyes, and he found himself before the open door of a low hut, or cabin, from which the light was shining.

At the same instant he heard the horse effecting a landing somewhat lower down.

The hut was empty, but with indications of having been but recently and hurriedly deserted.

A fire still glowed on the humble hearth, the burning lamp had not long been trimmed, and a couple of lanterns had been knocked down from their hooks on the wall.

Availing himself of one of the latter, the dripping detective, after a hasty examination of his surroundings, set out to find the horse.

He at last came upon him, peacefully cropping the grass at the entrance to a wild gorge or ravine, after having freed himself from the broken harness and conveyance.

The detective petted the faithful animal, which still exhibited undue restlessness.

This was found to be caused by a chestnut burr still adhering to the animal's tail, under the root of which it had been deftly inserted just prior to the disaster.

"So, Mr. Licn-tamer, there is another debt in the long account to be settled between us," muttered the detective. "But I am yet to find out how you managed to deceive the liveryman, no less than myself."

Having relieved the animal, he waved the lantern over his head, and critically examined his surroundings.

This he was the better enabled to do because of the sky having partly cleared.

He was on a narrow strip of bottom land, on one side of which the mountain highway passed at an elevation of twenty or thirty feet.

A narrow foot-path, barely discernible, slanted down the road-bank, crossed a corner of the meadow-strip, and disappeared into the ravine, at whose entrance he was standing, and one side of which formed the bed of the furious water-course.

Something white, glimmering in the footpath, caught his eye.

It proved to be a bit of cambric—probably of a delicate handkerchief.

Another, and yet another, appeared further on.

He followed, picking them up as he proceeded, until he had been led into the ravine.

There were many such bits, perhaps purposely strewed thus by some one who had been hurried along the path unwillingly.

The fourth bit that he picked up and examined bore a monogram.

In spite of its discoloration by the earth and rain, he deciphered it.

It was an entire corner of the kerchief, and the woven letters intertwined were Z. W.,—Zelda's own monogram.

How his heart beat as, all else forgotten, he took up that strange and breathless quest!

The cambric bits guided him up the ravine for a hundred yards, or more.

Then they suddenly ceased. The poor little handkerchief had doubtless at last been exhausted, and the dumb but intelligent leading-string was at an end.

But no; a little further on an amber bead continued the trail, glittering brightly in the faint path.

Zelda had often worn a necklace of such beads.

Snatching it up, he found another, and yet another.

Still oblivious to aught else, he was pressing eagerly on, when suddenly his lantern, which had long flickered dubiously, went out altogether, leaving him in impenetrable gloom.

His sober second thought asserted itself before he could curse the incident as a piece of ill-fortune.

"What a rash fool I am!" he thought. "The clew was in itself sufficient, without following it up in my present unprepared condition, and with all my preliminary engagements unfinished in my rear."

He managed to retrace his steps to the comparatively lighted meadow-strip.

Returning the useless lantern to the hut, which was still found untenanted, he led the horse up the bank to the highway, backed him as best he might, and gave him his own head to find his way stableward.

"Who was the man you gave me as a driver and a guide?" he asked of the liveryman.

The latter had drawn a long face at beholding the condition of the animal, minus the buggy and the best part of the harness.

"He called himself Jones," was the reply. "I never saw him before to-night, but he seemed up-and-up in horse-flesh; so I took him on for trial without a recommend."

"Well, your indiscretion has cost you a pretty penny," said Griplock, paying the horse-hire he had agreed on.

And he then told as much of the trail-driver's treachery as it was well for him to know, and left him to the bitterness of his private reflections.

Hurrying to the hotel, for it was now nearly midnight, he found Mr. Isaacs on the watch in the little dining-room of the suite occupied by his family.

The room, which was now darkened, had both a door and a small window looking out upon the main corridor and stairway.

Griplock told his story, and then asked the show-master why he was sitting in the dark.

"To watch the better," was the reply, with a motion toward the little window. "Hush and wait! Your prediction has been verified in part."

"Ha! has Mildred, then, stolen up to make Nesta's acquaintance?"

"Yes; fully ten minutes ago. Doubtless, they will come creeping down together before long."

"I believe you. But I am still wet and muddy. I must risk seeking my own room, at the other side of the hotel, to change my clothes, and make some other preparations."

The detective acted on this suggestion, and returned in a surprisingly short space of time.

"Not down yet?" he whispered.

"Not yet."

"Kitty then told her sister about the Gypsy girl and her ruse?"

"Yes; and it was easy to see that Mildred was just aching to communicate with her, and perhaps be off with her."

"You have resolved to let her have her bent?"

"Yes, anything to have her, unawares, help you to save Zelda. In spite of her passion for the unworthy scoundrel, she can be trusted to hold her own against Leomeister any day."

"It may even cure her."

"That is what I am hoping for."

"This expedition of mine may last for days, rather than hours."

"I am aware of that. Besides rescuing Zelda, you will have the recovery of the casket in mind, and the bringing of Vanderpoer's assassin to justice."

"As a matter of course. But, with Conrad and his curiosities, no less than Mildred, absent, how shall you manage?"

The show-master suppressed a small groan.

"As best I can," he sighed. "The show must get on without them. Hush!"

Two graceful figures, in waterproofs, with the hoods drawn, were coming softly down the staircase, one with a small portmanteau in her hand.

The latter was easily recognized as Mildred, the other as Nesta.

At the bottom of the steps they came to a pause.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MOUNTAIN PATH.

"Ah, you're hanging back already," the Gypsy girl was overheard to whisper. "I was sure that you were only boasting."

"You are mistaken," replied Milly. "I am perfectly resolved to go with you."

"Then why linger?"

"It is but for a moment. Should I pass these rooms without a temporary pause, or flutter? My parents and my sister are dear to me."

There was then a softening in Nesta's voice.

"Why go with me then?" said she. "You can still draw back."

"I must go!"

"But there is danger in it for you. Of course I shall help you to maintain your secret, as I have promised; but then Leomeister is hand-in-glove with Black Jago and others of our tribe. Should he discover your identity, he might not hesitate to take advantage of your loneliness."

Mildred seemed to tremble and hesitate.

"You will be there to afford me your protection," said she.

"To be sure, as far as it goes. But, though the sovereign of my people in my brother's absence, they are wild and avaricious. Besides—"

"Why do you hesitate? Say on, please."

"Besides, you are very handsome, my young lady. Even your sister is no handsomer."

"But Zelda is—or there are fools to think so, perhaps. I understand you, and will take my chances."

"Leomeister is a scoundrel."

"Don't I know that?"

"But, since you so hate Zelda, why not leave her to her danger?"

Mildred was seen to clench her hands.

"To him?" she muttered, hoarsely. "You know not of what you speak. You can have never loved."

"Save my missing brother, perhaps I never have. We Gypsies are queer women."

"Come; we must go."

They moved along the corridor, when Mildred ran back to press her lips to her father's door.

Then they were gone.

The show-master's eyes were glistening.

"A good girl, Milly, though a headstrong one!" was his comment, as he opened the door, and held out his hand to the detective. "Her heart's in the right place."

"Her safety," said Griplock, "shall be my charge, no less than Zelda's."

He pressed the extended hand, and followed after the young woman.

The skies had cleared, with plenty of starlight, and the promise of a moon.

As the detective had surmised, the young women, being fitly attired, led him the chase on foot.

It was a long tramp, but they seemed not to mind it, and led him directly to the door of the hut.

It was occupied now.

The shadowing detective had just time to make himself invisible, when the door opened in response to Nesta's knock.

A thick-set, low-sized, rather repulsive-looking man appeared, making a sort of obeisance.

Nesta and he exchanged words in the Zingari jargon, with which the detective was fortunately familiar.

"How far did you accompany them?" she asked.

"To the cross-paths, highness."

"Then they have reached the Dells ere this?"

"Doubtless, highness."

"Has Conrad followed his troupe?"

"Long ago, highness."

"Did Black Gogo send back any word for me?"

"None, highness."

"That will do. Give us lanterns."

This was done, and the path was resumed.

As the young women disappeared into the ravine, their shadow paused at its mouth to examine a small dark-lantern which he had provided himself with.

It was suddenly dashed out of his hand.

He wheeled to confront and close with the squat hut occupant, who had secretly tracked him to the spot.

The fellow was prodigiously strong, and no mean wrestler.

Before the detective could dispose of him, another man, tall, burly and powerful, sprung out of the ravine, and also silently tackled him.

Griplock was a willing imitator of these silent tactics, as a shout or outcry might have given away the secret of his pursuit to the young women passing on before.

For a moment or two the apparently unequal struggle seemed wholly in favor of the odds, for both the assailants were exceptionally powerful men, with good knowledge of wrestling.

Their object seemed to be to disable rather than destroy their victim.

For an instant success was apparently in their grasp.

The detective, as if with the breath wholly squeezed out of him, suddenly gasped, and then hung limp and motionless.

Hardly, however, had the others relaxed their efforts when he was once more a column of buoyant steel, with an electric throb in every fiber.

Over went the dwarfish ruffian, hurled over the bank with the force of a catapult, alighting on his head in the bed of the water-course with stunning force.

Then his tall and bulky confrere as suddenly found himself in the rib-crushing, anaconda-clutch that had never yet failed of victory—the famous griplock, with its irresistible grapevine twist, was brought to bear, and away he likewise went, over the detective's head, as if no more than a man of straw.

But, unlike the shorter man, he recovered from his tumble, and springing to his feet, dashed off along the line of the highway, without a word.

"Could that have been Center-pole Jack?" said the detective to himself, while recovering his lantern. "But there is no time to run after him now."

Without paying any further attention to the squat ruffian, who was still lying apparently insensible at the edge of the water-course, Griplock hurried into the ravine.

But the young women were now, he thought, so far on their way that there would be little chance of getting them in view again inside of half an hour.

However, he threaded the faint path to the point where he had picked up the last amber bead.

Other beads were found at intervals, and picking them up as he proceeded, he continued to feel his way, as it were, along the gorge.

But this of course was slow work, while doubtless the young women, under Nesta's experienced guidance, were sufficiently free of foot.

But the path became more distinct as it wound out of the ravine up among the mountains; though at that point the beads were no longer to be found, nor was there any other indication of the route over which Zelda had been taken.

But by this time he had collected about thirty of the amber spheres, which he concluded were enough to have made up the necklace which the poor girl had sacrificed.

Pushing on with great rapidity, in order to make up for lost time, and with a newly-risen moon to assist his passage, the detective now made good progress.

Still, when he at last came to a place where the single path forked into two, without any signs of the young women, he paused in disheartened embarrassment.

This place was most probably the cross-paths the hut-owner had alluded to, in response to Nesta's queries.

But no other information had been vouchsafed, and which of the new paths had the maidens taken?

That was the nut to crack.

While the detective was puzzling over it, he thought he heard the murmur of voices far off along the path to the right.

Quickly following up the clew, he found, to his great joy, that he was once more on the trail.

The voices proved to be those of Nesta and Mildred, who had halted in a wild nook beside the path to rest.

Under the circumstances, the detective had no hesitation in creeping within ear-shot.

Mildred had been making inquiries as to the nature of Gypsy life, and now the conversation was less abstract.

"You have not told me," said she, "how it is that Conrad is on such good terms with your tribe."

"He is familiar with many of our tribes," said Nesta. "I have known him or of him since I was a little child among the English moors."

"But he is not a Gypsy."

"His mother was a Turkish Gypsy, his father a Bohemian wanderer and adventurer—a proprietor of dancing bears and other performing animals."

"Would the fact of his mother having been a Gypsy give him recognition among other Gypsies anywhere?"

"Yes, to a certain degree. But then Conrad mixed with our Bohemian brethren very much in his youth, and he is familiar with our language, customs and ways."

"Was he intimate with your own tribe in England?"

"Yes."

"And with the brother, John Vincent, from whom you say you have been separated so long?"

"Yes."

"But when and how did Leomeister discover the present whereabouts of your band?"

"Some weeks ago, when the show was heading in this direction; but exactly how he discovered it I can't say. My cousin, Black Jago, however, has kept track of Conrad for years. It might have been through him."

"Strange that he wouldn't also have kept track of your brother!"

"We had never heard of him as Center-pole Jack, nor even as a circus man in this country."

"But Leomeister, knowing him and having known you, might have advised you of his identity."

"Conrad is a deep one, who never gives anything away."

"But he once gave his best secret away to me; though, for that matter, I had him at an unfair disadvantage."

"You surprise me. How was that?"

Mildred then told the story of the mid-air extracted secret, which seemed to amuse her Gypsy companion greatly, as she laughed long and loud.

"Still," said she, "the possession of the secret seemed to do Conrad's enemies no good."

"I never intended it for his enemies, but for my own use against him and the girl. Now he must despise me. Kitty wormed it out of me, after flattering me on to obtain it for, presumably, my own advantage."

"That stands to reason. And the casket disappeared yet again, you say, out of the searchers' very clutch?"

"So I have become aware."

"How was its disappearance brought about the second time?"

"Gogo again, and perhaps again with Kalulah's help, I fancy."

"How did they work it?"

"I can only tell by inference. Doubtless one or both had crept among the wagons to secure it from the pole pocket, but not in time to be beforehand with the searchers. Then a trick was resorted to. A slow-torpedo was set off under the wagon just as Griplock, the detective, was beating in the pocket with a stake-driver. In the confusion that followed, the searchers were again foiled."

"Cleverly, too. Where is the casket now?"

"How should I know, any more than you? It is still Leomeister's secret."

There was a pause, after which Nesta's voice was heard to say:

"I like that Griplock; that is, if he is the one who stood mostly at your father's elbow when they were all cross-examining me."

"That was he, judging from your description a short time ago."

"Well, I liked him. His eyes, which were like those of a falcon, never once quitted my face. He looked like a Romany man."

"He isn't though. He's a mystery. I hate and fear that man!"

"Why?"

"He is a born sleuth-hound. Something admonishes me that he will cause Conrad's ruin."

"And yet you say he is Zelda's lover?"

"I believe they are engaged."

"Then you ought to like him. He will scarcely rest until he has torn the girl out of Conrad's power."

"But at the cost of Conrad's safety—perhaps of his very life!"

"What! you think him responsible for that assassination?"

"I think nothing. Don't ask me. It makes my flesh creep!"

"I thought you loved Conrad."

"I adore him; I can't help it."

"And yet, to save his life from the gibbet, you would surrender him to this infatuation for Zelda."

"I—I didn't say that exactly. Heavens! how I hate that girl!"

"Yet you would resign him to her fascination, rather than risk his life by putting the Circus Detective on his track?"

"I tell you, Nesta, I didn't say that. I don't know whether I would or not."

"I should know."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, if I were in your place, you know. That is, supposing that I loved Griplock—not such a hard task, either—as you profess to love Conrad, and he chanced to be in Conrad's present position; infatuated with another girl, you know, and she in his power."

"Ah! what then?"

Nesta's eyes were seen to flash, her white teeth to sparkle through the gloom.

"What then! Why, I would see him dead by the rope, the knife, the bullet, by slow torture—ay, a hundredfold—rather than lose him for one moment to a rival's arms! That is the way I, the Gypsy, would love. But come; we are sufficiently rested."

Not a syllable of the foregoing conversation had been lost by the detective.

As the young women proceeded on their toilsome way, he flitted behind them as faithfully and noiselessly as their own shadows might have done.

As the gray of morning began to streak the east, the path grew steeper and wilder.

It seemed strange that such savage solitudes could be found within but two or three miles of the large town at which the show was exhibiting, and its populous outlying agricultural districts.

But this apparent anomaly is to be found everywhere in our country.

Within twenty-five miles of the moneyed heart of New York, west, north, east—in New Jersey, in Westchester county or in Long Island, may be found many such forested or mountain districts, as savage, solitary and lonely as if never trodden by the foot of man.

At last, when day had sufficiently broadened to render the scenery passably distinct, the maidens reached a natural gate of rock from which there sloped away a lovely dingle, among whose trees the morning fires of a Gypsy encampment were beginning to redden and to leap.

"I am queen here—it is my domain," said Nesta. Come. And they descended.

The shadower was about to follow through the gate, or gorge, when an enormous rock, toppled from above, barred his way.

At the same instant he was pounced upon by a gigantic Gypsy, swarthier than an Indian.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DETECTIVE'S COUNTERPLOT.

"SPIES and sneaks are at a discount here!" growled the detective's fresh assailant, whose grip was of iron. "I am Black Jago; who are you?"

Griplock's answer was a blow between the eyes.

This was enough of a staggerer to enable him to secure something like a fair hold in the catch-as-catch-can that had been sprung upon him so unexpectedly.

Then was instituted such a wrestling bout as was outside of even the Circus Detective's experience.

In addition to being his superior in brute strength, the giant was almost, if not quite, his equal in agility and dexterity.

Thrice did the detective secure his terrible griplock, though without the "heeling" accompaniment, and as often was it broken.

Twice did the Greco-Roman bear's hug of the colossus almost strangle him, before being neutralized by the swift ducking and back-wrench that the detective knew so well how to execute.

At last, however, by a tremendous exhibition of both strength and activity, the latter combined his lock-twist with the shouldering heave that had thus far been found irresistible, and, with a final spontaneity of every bone, muscle, pulse and sinew in his superb composition, hurled the giant over his head.

It was like a huge rock being hurled into the air by a spouting geyser, over whose momentarily quiescent vent it has been placed.

But, instead of falling on his head and shoulder as it was strictly "good form" for him to do, Black Jago, by a mid-air twist, alighted upon his toes, where he spun around like a top.

Then he had again precipitated himself upon the detective before the latter could fully recover from the shock of his own exertion.

Teeth were set hard, brows knit, and the palestrian contest was renewed with fresh earnestness and fury.

"You're the toughest man I ever yet tackled," said the detective to himself. "But I'm a stayer, and I will have you yet."

But the match continued long in doubt, for, in addition to his superior muscularity and equal dexterity, Jago was almost as much of a stayer as he.

Almost, but not quite.

At last the Gypsy's planted foot slipped on a treacherous stone.

Swift as lightning the slip was taken advantage of.

Again the grip-twist tightened on the remaining leg, the shouldering heave was simultaneously brought to bear; and then, thundering down as the oak at the uprooting whirlwind's wrench, Black Jago was fairly on his back, both shoulder-blades down, and with an iron knee on either outstretched arm.

Though of treacherous instincts, by no men on earth is superiority in athletic pursuits more enthusiastically appreciated than by those mysterious wanderers, the Gypsies.

Blown and defeated as he was, the prostrated Jago looked up into his conqueror's face, and smiled his admiration.

"You're the devil himself," said he, in the Gypsy jargon.

"Not at all," replied the other, in the same tongue. "I am simply a good little man, and so are you—the toughest, in fact, that I ever tackled."

"Who are you?"

"Tom, surnamed Griplock, Crimmins, the accredited detective of George Isaac's Universal Circus, Menagerie and Roman Hippodrome."

"Gad! I've heard of you before; who hasn't? I'll tell you what I'll do with you."

"Are you in a position to dictate?"

"Of course not. But I'd like to make you a proposition."

"Go on."

"You've worsted me fairly in wrestling. I'll spar you for the salt."

This proposition—doubtless unintelligible to most readers—was perfectly understood by Griplock Crimmins.

To fight for and win an exchange of salt—i. e., the representative of general hospitality—is, among the older Zingari traditions, an equivalent to immunity from ill-acts and ill-wishes on the part of the defeated man forever thereafter, no matter if the victor may have theretofore been his hereditary foe.

The detective's instant answer to the proposition was made in action, not in words.

He sprang lightly to his feet, and threw himself into a pugilistic attitude.

His adversary followed suit.

The boxing at once began.

It lasted twenty minutes.

At the end of that period Griplock was leading his antagonist to a brooklet not far distant, for Black Jago's eyes were bunged nearly shut; and, being no longer able to see to fight, he had reluctantly, in the figurative language of the prize-ring, thrown up the sponge.

Griplock's face also betrayed substantial mementoes of his adversary's handiwork, for it had been a hard-fought battle, but, compara-

tively speaking, he was little the worse for his encounter.

Arriving at the brook, he assisted the Gypsy in caring for his injuries, and looked after his own.

In half an hour Jago had so reduced the swelling about his eyes as to be able to look out of them.

As he did so the keen, jet-black pupils sparkled with nothing but good-humored resignation.

He took from his pouch a small wallet containing some coarse-grained salt, and tendered it, open, to the detective.

The latter took a pinch; so did the Gypsy.

Then, after touching knuckles with each other each tasted and swallowed his salt.

"You're secure enough here," then said Jago, rising. "Wait for me." And he strode away.

He returned in the course of half an hour, carrying some provisions in a paper bag in his hand, and a bundle under his arm.

The contents of the former he spread before the detective; the latter he flung at his feet.

"We have eaten salt together, and I shall do my part," said he. "Move among our tents as you will. I shall not deter you; but neither shall I help you, come what may."

With that he once more strode away.

The detective breakfasted upon the victuals, which, though by no means choice, he ate with a good appetite.

He then investigated the bundle.

It contained a hat, coat, waistcoat, knee-breeches and leather leggings, a rough and serviceable costume much affected to the present day by Gypsy horse-traders and old-country stablesmen.

Moreover, it was pretty accurately his fit.

To invest himself with this rig, and stow away his discarded outer garments in a convenient hollow tree not far away, was the work of but a few moments.

The detective then proceeded to stain his face, neck and hands with a preparation of walnut-juice that he possessed, besides making certain other disguising alterations in his eyebrows, moustache and mouth- corners that he well understood, with a clear pool of the little brook for a toilet-mirror.

The result was such a transformation in his external personality that Zelda herself, even with the quick detection of love's eyes, would hardly have known him.

Having finished these preparations, the detective cut himself a stout staff, and passing through the rocky gate, walked down into the Gypsy encampment with a half-swaggering, half-hang-dog air that was in true keeping with his assumed character.

A majority of the Gypsy males, including Black Jago, having finished their morning meal were gathered around a sort of inclosure where several of their number were breaking-in some unruly colts.

Disregarding their lowering and inquisitive looks, Griplock passed directly to the largest tent in the camp, at the door of which Nesta was sitting, with Mildred and an evil-looking old Gypsy at her side.

"You are the queen," he said, simply, and with a rude obeisance. "Hail!"

She looked at him in surprise, for he spoke in the most approved Romany jargon, but with a marked foreign accent.

"You are a Zingarino?"

"Yes."

"Of what country?"

"Spain, by birth, but lastly from France."

And he began to speak to her in Castilian.

She replied with difficulty, and then, with an impatient gesture, bade him address her in English.

"A pretty Zingarina, you!" said he, half-contemptuously. "A tribe queen should know more."

She colored, in part, but not altogether angrily.

"What more should I know, then?" she demanded.

"Every characteristic in our Romany tongue throughout the world. So should every Zingarino and Zingarina. Then our wanderers would be a wide-spread brotherhood, with influence; now they are ragged bands, detached vagrants, despised nomads."

A threatening murmur, from the Gypsies who had by this time collected near the speaker, was altogether unheeded.

Nesta's lip curled, but at the same time she was not greatly displeased.

She was more picturesquely attired than when the detective had last seen her, a red cloak and scarlet hood, or sort of turban, displaying her dark comeliness impressively.

"A book-Gypsy!" she said, with affected disdain. "A Romany schoolman!"

"Tis beyond your fathoming," was the stern reply. "Reyna Zingarina, respect the sign!"

He exhibited a ring, the sight of which caused a startled look to come into her face, while the men, including Black Jago, fell back a step or two in a species of dismay.

It was on the third finger of his right hand, and was apparently but of copper—a massive ring, deeply engraved with strange characters, and holding an opal in rough setting; but it

might have been a sultan's signet from the effect that was produced.

"The Emblem!" muttered Nesta, with a troubled look. "Zingarino from Spain—"

"From France lastly, if you please."

"Zingarino from France, why do you visit our tribe?"

"Dismiss this crew, and you may be permitted to know." He made a contemptuous gesture, and at an added sign from her, the men began to disperse. "All but that one!" and he indicated Black Jago. "He is of thy family? Yes. Let him remain."

Black Jago accordingly lingered, regarding his late adversary, whom he had recognized solely by the garments, with mingled respect and perplexity.

"The two at your side can likewise remain," said the detective.

Mildred looked interested, but the old woman burst into a cackling, eldritch screech.

"Now," said the disguised detective, coolly. "I will vouchsafe to explain myself to your—queenship."

"Whom does your pretended business concern?" demanded Nesta, reddening afresh.

The answer was an unexpected one, to say the least.

"Zelda Vanderpoer, and the foreign rewards that are offered for her identification."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FRENCH ADVERTISEMENT.

THERE was a general catching of breaths, and the old hag leaned forward with glistening eyes, her bony fingers hooked like the talons of a bird of prey.

The word "rewards" had touched her avaricious nature to the quick.

"What mean you?" at length demanded Nesta.

"In the first place, confess to me that the girl alluded to is here in your encampment."

Mildred looked doubly interested, while Nesta exchanged a swift look with Jago.

While the momentary hesitation lasted, the disguised detective lifted the magic ring, as it might be called, and, turning it slowly in different lights, seemed to be reading some mysterious meaning in its opal setting.

The effect of this action was instantaneous.

"The girl is here," said Nesta, hastily. "She is sleeping in yonder tent."

She indicated at the further side of the encampment, before the door of which Griplock now for the first time perceived Leomeister's performing bear fast asleep at the foot of his stake, with his feet in the air.

"So," said the detective, in a harsh voice. "In whose special custody is the young girl?"

"My grandmother here," said Nesta, laying her hand on the hag's shoulder, "looks after Zelda's safety."

Another cackling screech from the beldame.

"Ay, ay!" she croaked; "the bird is mine,"—with a clawing gesture—"and she'll remain mine while there's gold in her feathers."

"Silence the witch, or drown her!" said the detective, harshly. "I am not here to hear owls screech, or jackals yelp. There's truth for us all, though, in what she says."

"What mean you, sir?" asked Nesta.

"Listen." He took from his pocket a Parisian newspaper, the *Figaro*, from which he proceeded to translate aloud an advertisement of considerable length.

It was an inquiry for one Genevieve de Villemessant, heiress to the Marquis de Villemessant, recently deceased. The girl had been carried to the colonies of French Guiana in her infancy by her father, a disreputable younger brother of the marquis, and was now, if alive, sole heiress to the latter's magnificent estates. But, while the father was known to have died at Cayenne, the child had mysteriously disappeared.

"Is Zelda the child advertised for?" asked Nesta, in astonishment.

"I hope to prove that she is," was the collected reply.

"How shall you prove it?"

"That is my business, not yours—at present."

"At present! What do you mean by that?"

"That your whole tribe may be concerned in the proofs—interested in the girl, I mean."

"Won't you explain?"

"Yes. My tribe stole the child directly after her father's death, and carried her to Algiers. There she passed into Show-master Vanderpoer's possession. Let these facts but be proved, and our fortunes—the fortunes of our Romany tribes—are secured."

"In what way?"

"By selling the girl and her proofs to the next of kin, who are hungering for the proofs—of her death."

The hag uttered another screech, this time an eager one.

"My share!" she yelled. "Share and share alike!"

Black Jago's eyes had glistened at the infamous proposition, while Nesta had remained unmoved; but Mildred, to Griplock's secret satisfaction, seemed troubled and indignant.

"Zingarino, what is your name?" Nesta asked, abruptly.

"John Perez," said the detective, promptly, though almost thrown off his guard.

"Well, Amigo Perez," she continued, "we shall have to consult over what you have said. There is yet another interested."

"What other?"

She nodded indicatively, for Leomeister, followed by Gogo, now came out of one of the smaller tents, yawning and stretching himself, as if newly risen from a long slumber.

But he at once perceived the group before Nesta's lodge, and strode up to it, knitting his brows.

"Stranger in the camp?" said he, "What is up?"

Nesta merely nodded.

"Zingarino?" (Is he a Gypsy?) asked the self-styled Perez, indifferently.

"No; but that other who is interested," replied Nesta.

"Oh!" And he eyed the new-comer with an irritating stare.

Gogo had paused a short distance off, where he was wriggling his long neck, running out his tongue, and basking in the warm sunshine.

Leomeister was mostly brutal with those whom he regarded as his inferiors.

"What is up, I asked?" he repeated, eying them severally, but the detective especially with no friendly looks. "Why am I not answered?"

Nesta looked inquiringly at the detective.

"Tell him, if you choose," said the latter, shrugging his shoulders, "but, of course, not being one of us, he would not share."

"No, no!" screeched the grandmother, shaking her elf-locks. "A Romany deal! Only Gypsies share."

Nesta accordingly stated, in brief, the proposition that had been made.

Conrad here for the first time perceived Milly, who had shrunk back at his approach. He frowned at first, and then nodded forgivingly. The cause of her presence he easily divined, and it was not to be forgotten that Milly was also a very pretty young woman.

But the proposition, as recited by Nesta, filled him with mingled astonishment and consternation.

"This is a trick, a lie!" he exclaimed. "This man," turning menacingly to the unmoved detective, "is a fraud who is deceiving you!"

"How do you know that?" asked Nesta.

"Know it? Why, I can prove it! Here, let me read for myself."

And he snatched the newspaper, which the pseudo John Perez had still retained in his hand.

"The advertisement is genuine enough," said he, quickly mastering the marked paragraph. "He has not deceived you in that. But it is impossible that the Villemessant heiress referred to can be Zelda."

Griplock coolly repossessed himself of the paper.

"Why impossible?" said he.

"Because—because, though Zelda is really a missing French heiress, her real name is not Villemessant, and she cannot be the one advertised for."

"You said you could prove it."

"It is in my power to do so."

"How?"

"By certain papers in my possession, papers proving conclusively Zelda's real name, parentage and prospective fortune."

"Produce them."

"I'll see you hanged first! The girl and her fate are in my keeping."

The detective shrugged his shoulders, and smiled.

Had the casket been produced, he would have seized and held it against any odds then and there; but he had had no idea that Leomeister would even exhibit such a treasure.

"What a mouthing boaster, my friends, this fellow is making of himself!" said he, to Nesta and Black Jago. "He offers certain proofs, and then withholds them—for the excellent reason that they do not exist. I offer to verify my proofs, and also to share with you in the rewards, which he would appropriate alone, besides keeping the heiress for himself. Judge between us."

"That's the lingo!" croaked the hag once more. "Share and share alike!"

"The stranger is fairer spoken than you are, Conrad," said Nesta. "There is no denying that."

"That is true," said Black Jago.

"But how does he offer to prove his story?" demanded Conrad.

"By private converse with Zelda herself."

"I won't hear of it! His story is a fraud in its application. The advertisement cannot allude to Zelda. It is impossible. I know it to be so."

"Produce your papers, then," said the detective, tauntingly.

"I shall not."

"Because they do not exist."

"You're a liar! The papers are too valuable to be exhibited here."

"In other words, their proved worthlessness would lose you your power over the girl."

Leomeister was in a white rage.

"You lie again!" he roared.

He shook his herculean form, as if for an encounter, and advanced menacingly, when Black Jago laid a warning hand on his arm.

"Don't try it on," said the latter. "Look at my hammered face and eyes. That fellow's handiwork, after first throwing me fairly—me, you understand!"

But the lion-tamer evidently thought himself more than a match for even the colossal Gypsy.

He tried to shake off the detaining hand.

The detective had restrained himself with difficulty. A physical victory over Conrad would be too likely to 'give away' his identity.

"Do not interfere, Jago," said he, quietly. "I shall accommodate the blusterer when the time comes. In the mean time, I demand my interview with the young girl. If she proves to be the Villemessant heiress advertised for, she is ours; if not, Gypsy interest in her is at an end. Isn't that fair?"

"Yes, it is," said Black Jago.

"You shall have the interview, Perez," said Nesta, decisively. "Merka, see if the maiden is risen from her slumber."

The Gypsy grandmother eagerly hobbled away.

Leomeister would have still resisted the demand, but that he did not venture to antagonize the entire band, whose cupidity he well knew.

Besides, at this moment Mildred, pale and beseechingly attractive, went to him and took his hand.

Still followed by Gogo, he allowed her to lead him away, but with a jealous glance over and anon directed toward Zelda's tent.

Merka, as the old woman had been called, presently returned, saying that Zelda was awake, and willing to receive the stranger.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LOVERS' MEETING.

"WAIT," said Nesta, as the disguised Griplock was eagerly starting away. "Zingarino Perez, I shall conduct you."

There was an odd look in her tone and manner that was puzzling, to say the least.

She led him to the tent, but paused outside of it.

"Your interview with the beautiful Zelda, Zingarino Perez," said she, with a peculiar smile, "shall be strictly private. I give you my word for it."

"Thank you. It stands to reason that such is my desire. You are kind to insure me against intrusion, though."

He was about to enter the tent, but she again detained him, this time by taking his hand.

He felt that hers trembled as she did so.

"There is one thing more ere you enter there," said she.

"What is it?"

She no longer smiled, but blushed, instantly, however, growing set-lipped and stern.

"I would warn you."

"Warn me?"

"Yes."

"What against?"

"Against overdoing it."

She gave a little hard laugh, gripped his hand tighter, as if to keep him back, then flung it away from her, and retreated.

Considerably mystified, and not a little uneasy, Griplock entered the tent.

Zelda, pale and unhappy, but still refreshed-looking, as if after a good sleep, was seated on a sort of rude divan, while Kalulah was just finishing dressing her hair for her.

She looked up eagerly, and then lowered her eyes with a disappointed sigh.

The new-comer waited till the Girl-Fish had been dismissed.

Then, making sure that both spying and eavesdropping were impossible, he took a seat by the fair captive's side, and—kissed her.

She recoiled in amazement and indignation, then caught her breath, looked again, and, with a low, joyous exclamation, melted on his breast.

"Ah, it is you, you at last!" she murmured between her falling tears. "I felt you would come, I knew it, and yet it is like a dream now that you are here."

"My love, my life! But enough of this. At any instant we may be observed. Let us speak low, and be watchful—cautious!"

He had released her, after the one delirious embrace, but still retained her hand.

"How came you here? Tell me everything!" were her next words.

"No, dearest; there is no time for that," said he, earnestly. "And, as the trick is explained by which Conrad succeeded in bringing you here, I must forego even the recital of your own hardships and adventures for the present. The situation in hand is enough to occupy us."

"You are here in what assumed character?" asked Zelda, at once entering into the business aspect of the affair with her accustomed quickness.

"As that of John Perez, a Zingarino, or Spanish Gypsy from abroad."

"The momentous stranger that the old hag just hinted of to me?"

"Doubtless."

"What is this strange story about my being

the inquired-for heiress of some great French estate?"

"A fabrication."

"What?"

"Entirely so."

"But poor Papa Vanderpoer used to hint of such high fortune in store for me."

"He was right. The papers for which he was murdered—now in Leomeister's possession—will prove that, if we ever get them back."

"Ah! so he tells me."

"I knew he would."

"But this other estate?"

"Likewise a reality, without a doubt, but in no wise concerning you."

"I don't understand."

"You shall, and at once. I came upon the French advertisement by accident yesterday. The newspaper was on the hotel reading-room table. I saw how it could be made to suit my purpose at sometime or other, and I appropriated it. That is all."

"How clever you are!"

"Not so clever as I seem. The inquiry seemed in many ways to fit your case, and I availed myself of the accidental resemblance."

"But you have never seen the real papers bearing upon my real name and parentage?"

"Never."

"Nor I, as a matter of course. Then how can you be certain that I am not the heiress in the present instance?"

"Because you were never in Cayenne."

"That is true."

"Because, moreover, you never could have had such exact antecedents as are described in the Villemessant advertisement. Here; let me read it to you."

He did so, in the original, Zelda understanding French as well as he.

"Ah, no! that cannot be meant for me," was her comment at the close. "Poor girl! who and where can she be?"

"Poor yourself, rather!" said her lover. "The Villemessant heiress is at least being looked for by her uncle's executors, while you are as yet nameless, and will have to enforce your rights when they and your name are made known."

"True!" and the gentle sadness returned to her face.

"But, in order to reach that end, you must pretend to be convinced that you are the Villemessant heiress."

She opened her eyes.

"Yes, that is just it," and he went on to explain: "After you have resigned your cause trustingly into our hands—the Gypsies' hands, you understand—we are to sell you out to certain wicked ones, the next of kin, who are eager for your death, that they may succeed to the marquis's estate."

"Ah! that accounts for old Merka's sudden obsequiousness a few minutes ago."

"Exactly. Gypsies are money-hawks the world over, and stolen heiresses are their specialty. Now do you comprehend my plot?"

"Yes."

"And will second me?"

"Certainly. Only the benefits of the deception are not clear to me."

"I will make them clearer. In the first place, Leomeister will be compelled to surrender you into my keeping."

"Heaven speed the deception."

"In the next place, he will resist, though in vain; but there will be delay. During that delay, you must dissimulate, and help me to secure the stolen casket."

"Ah! only instruct me. I shall do my best."

"I know it. Zelda, the day that I shall carry you back to Mr. Isaacs's protection, with those precious papers in our possession, will be the joyous turning point of your life. Your enemies will have melted away—Leomeister, the chief one, let us hope, to meet a murderer's doom. You will be rich, loftily-named, honored, with the wide, beautiful earth before you where to choose!"

She clasped her hands.

"Ah! but only with you," she murmured, caressing his arm. "No wealth, no name, no honor, without you to share them. On other terms, I would not take them, even as Fate's forced gift!"

He mastered an impulse to clasp her to his heart, but his eyes were soft.

"It would not be just or fair," said he, rather as if speaking to himself. "Heaven only knows how passionately I love you, my beautiful one! and it is none the less true that I deemed you poor and friendless—a waif of adventure, like myself—when I first met and won you in these western wilds. But it would not be fair; I, a rough, rude man, little more than an adventurer still—you so young, so lovely—"

"She threw herself into his arms, and stopped his words with kisses."

"As you love me, never hint of a possible disparity again!" she murmured. "What are those words of Ruth's in the sweet Bible poem? 'Where thou goest I shall go, where thou dwellest I shall dwell. Thy country shall be my country, thy God shall be my God.' At all events, we part no more. Now instruct me in the part I must play."

"You will have to be governed by circum-

stances and your natural shrewdness in seconding me. First, tell me if Conrad has hinted to you the nature of the casket's contents."

"Just hinted, that was all. You must remember that he has not had time for more."

"What did he say, and when did he say it?"

"It was when he was first carrying me off on Black Sultan through the storm."

"What were his words?"

"These, as well as I can recall them: 'Struggle no longer, for your life, your name, your fortune are henceforth in my power. I alone possess their master-key, now that your adoptive father is no more. Consent to be my bride and you shall be rich, titled, honored, with the world of fashion and pleasure at your feet; deny me, and you forever remain the beggarly circus-rider that you are, without so much as a rightful name of your own.'"

The detective ground his teeth.

"Go on," said he.

"That was all. Shortly after that we met a man and woman in a lovely mountain road. They were on horseback, and looked like Gypsies. The man was a giant, the woman much younger and handsome. She changed places with me, and I was brought here."

"The woman was Nesta, the princess of these wanderers; the giant, Black Jago, her cousin. Go on."

"The giant brought me to this camp late last evening. I was placed here in charge of old Merka. The plot to carry me off must have long been under way, for she seemed expecting me. She gave me food, dry garments, and tried to persuade me to lie down, but I would not. Much later in the night, Gogo, Kalulah and the bear reached the encampment. The girl was allotted to attend and keep me company. She steadfastly refused to give me any inkling of Conrad's intentions, but otherwise was not insolent or disagreeable. After that I got a good night's rest. That is all. I do not know if Leomeister is here. I have not seen him since he gave me in charge of Black Jago, as you call him, and took Nesta in my place before him on Black Sultan."

"Leomeister must arrived some time during the night," said Griplock. "Listen; for I see that you must be told of my own adventures up to this hour, in order that you may thoroughly understand the present situation. But first pray enlighten me on one point."

"What is it?"

"What did you mean by those words. 'Save me! he is carrying me off to the mountains,' when you last caught sight of Spezzi and me together?"

"Kitty and Milly were there, too."

"Yes, they were."

"Well, my dressing-room had just collapsed, and I was fainting with fright when Conrad suddenly burst into my presence on Black Sultan, and snatched me up before him. He was greatly excited, and muttered something about bearing me away to the mountains. After that, everything passed like a dream."

"Al's explained now on your part," said the detective; and he forthwith told his own story.

"Who would think that you could pass through such trials, not only alive, but also unharmed?" she exclaimed, when he had finished. "Now tell me what I am to do."

"You remember something of your life in Algiers, don't you?"

"A little, but that little with considerable distinctness."

"Well, you must pretend to remember further back than Algiers—say, back to some other tropical port that might have been Cayenne, in French Guiana, you know."

"Wait a minute."

She knit her brows, as if in a vague, reminiscent effort.

"You are to pretend this," continued her lover, "merely in order to keep up the Villemessant fiction."

"I understand that; but wait."

"Wait for what? Of course, you never were at Cayenne?"

"I suppose not, of course. But then I was at some other tropical place prior to Algiers—yes, and with another man besides papa and mamma Planchez, too. Wait!"

He was gazing at her perplexedly. *Might* she be the Villemessant heiress, after all? No, it seemed too fantastic to be possible.

Her brow cleared, and she shook her head.

"It is no use trying," said she. "I can't fix that previous tropical port and that other man in my memory, though they are still dustily ticketed away in one of its crannies somewhere. No; it's no use trying. Still, this will let me out of directly helping a falsehood."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I can bring forward what I may remember of my ante-Algerian life, so to speak, and let that pass as applying to Cayenne."

"Excellent! Well, the next item in your instructions is for you to keep your pretty eyes peeled for the whereabouts of the missing casket."

"Ah, I shall do that. But it must needs be a deep cunning that will get ahead of Gogo and his master."

Griplock was now about to propose that the

interview terminate, lest undue suspicions should be excited by its length, when scuffling feet and loud voices were heard approaching.

They both stepped to the entrance.

Leomeister, furious with rage, was desirous of interrupting the interview, while both Mildred and Black Jago were endeavoring to restrain him.

Nesta, statuesquely severe, and old Merka were near at hand, while Gogo, Kalulah, Purring Pedro and a mob of Gipsy young men and women were grinningly looking on.

"The girl is in my charge," cried Conrad, "and she shall not be tampered with."

"That depends," said Nesta, coldly. "If we conclude to take the young girl under our protection, there will be no further need of yours."

CHAPTER XX.

MAN AGAINST BEAR.

CONRAD turned upon the Gypsy princess like a wolf being robbed of his prey, but her calmly contemptuous manner quieted him even more than Black Jago's powerful restraining hand.

Besides, just at that moment he caught sight of Zelda and the pseudo Perez at the tent entrance.

So did Nesta, and the peculiar look that Griplock had noticed once before came over her face.

"I brought her here!" continued the lion-tamer, though a little less furiously. "She is mine!"

"As I said before," repeated Nesta, "that depends."

Zelda suddenly stepped before them, an angry color in her cheeks that enhanced her delicate beauty amazingly.

"Is it of me that you dare to speak in this tone of ownership?" she demanded, confronting her abductor. "Infamous, cowardly scoundrel! If I am reduced to the extremity of placing myself under any one's protection, rest assured that it shall not be under yours."

Recovering his self-control, Conrad shrugged his mighty shoulders, as much as to say. "But can you help yourself, my dear? Well, we shall see."

"Scoundrel!" she continued, disdainfully; infinitely sooner would I trust my future to these Gypsy wanderers than to thee. Mildred Isaacs, how can you touch that ruffianly hand? I believe there is blood on it—my foster-father's blood! As God is my witness, I believe he murdered Mr. Enos Vanderpoer!"

She was magnificently lovely in delivering this terrible accusation.

Leomeister had grown livid, but he was once more complete master of himself.

"Wild and injurious words, Zelda!" said he, in a low voice. "Mere ravings, else they might cause you trouble."

Milly had suddenly dropped his hand, and now, when she would have taken it again, he rudely cast off her touch.

The detective gravely advanced.

Zelda could not have seconded his plot more effectively than by her impulsive words and action, had she deliberately tried, but she might go too far.

"You say," said he, addressing himself in a business-like way to Nesta, "that his claim of guardianship over this young woman depends."

Nesta nodded.

"Depends upon what?" continued Griplock.

"Upon whether or not she has satisfied you that she is the French heiress in question."

"She has satisfied me on that point. I have cross-examined her carefully. Her memory of her childhood is somewhat vague, but still distinct enough to establish her identification before a court of law, in France or elsewhere."

Leomeister burst into a derisive laugh, which was none the less somewhat forced.

"Hear me, my friends," cried the detective, addressing the Gypsies collectively. "This young girl is the missing heiress to the estates of the Marquis Pierre Charles de Villemessant, recently deceased in Marseilles. A great reward is offered for her discovery and identification by the executors of the lost will and testament, by which she inherits immense properties. I represent the next of kin after her. They offer yet greater rewards on their own account for this girl's identification, though naturally enough more interested to know that she is dead than that she is alive. In either event," this with an assumption of hypocritical mystery, "I aim to secure the proffered rewards for your tribe and mine, for I am a Gypsy, like yourselves. I therefore tender her our protection and guardianship from this time forth until she either comes to her own, or the mysterious Destroyer shall overtake her in his own good time. Have I your sanction? Will your tribe share the trust with mine?"

There was a roar of consent, high over which rung the jubilation of old Merka, clear and distinct.

"There's gold in the girl, gold in her!" cackled the witch, executing a sort of hobbling dance around Zelda. "Hurrah! hurrah! she is ours."

"We accept the trust," said Nesta, "provided Zelda makes no objection."

Zelda bowed her head

At a sign from the detective, Nesta called to Mildred, who came to her side.

"Miss Isaacs," said she, with a meaning look, "I wish you to share Miss Vanderpoer's tent with her, if you desire to tarry with our band."

Mildred hesitated. Her interview with the lion-tamer had evidently given her but little satisfaction.

Then she slowly went over to Zelda, who, knowing nothing of her unreasonable jealousy, eagerly caught her hand.

But at this point Leomeister could contain himself no longer.

He again burst into his derisive laugh.

"This is the depth of bad faith, but you will find the tables turned on you," he cried. "I have already bargained with you Gypsies for your assistance with the girl."

"There are others who may bargain better," said Nesta, coldly.

"But you will find yourselves sold—ludicrously sold!" he persisted. "That girl is no more the sought-for heiress you take her for than the most ragged, fortune-telling wench in your band."

"Prove the contrary," said Nesta.

"Ay, let him do that," interposed the detective. "Let him produce the papers that he vaunts and I am done."

"That I shall not do," was the dogged response.

"Then hold your peace!"

Leomeister gave him a deadly look, as he turned to retire to an isolated tent with his faithful trio of curiosities.

"Adios, Señor Perez!" said he, with mock politeness. "It is your game to-day; it may be mine to-morrow."

Griplock gave him no heed, but at this instant Gogo spitefully stimulated the performing by a secret pinch that he knew of, and Purring Pedro, chancing to be brushing against the detective just then, suddenly precipitated himself upon the latter with an infuriated roar.

The result was that the detective, coolly evading the clawing hug, sent the animal prostrate with a flush blow under the ear.

Nesta looked interested, and the Gypsy rank and file cheered loudly.

"You might have more humanity for a dumb brute," said Conrad, getting Pedro on his feet again and petting him. "With a fair chance, you wouldn't dare to maltreat him thus."

"Wouldn't I?" was the cool rejoinder. "With similar provocation, only try me."

Leomeister could not help staring at him.

"What!" he exclaimed, incredulously; "you would try conclusions with Pedro?"

Pedro was an exceptionally powerful bear, larger than many grizzlies that are exhibited, and with a well-known vile enough temper of his own when excited.

"Assuredly I would," said the detective composedly, and forgetting his prudence in the secret excitement of the moment. "Muffle his paws, that I may not be lacerated, and I will wrestle him for a wager on the spot."

"You mean it?"

For answer, the detective threw off his coat and waistcoat.

Instantly, amid great excitement, the bear was made ready for the contest by having his paws and feet securely muffled with old rags tied on with stout thongs.

"What is the wager to be?" demanded the lion-tamer, holding the bear back as the strange antagonists were about to confront each other.

"For what you please," was the detective's indifferent response.

Leomeister drew a long breath.

"Let it be," said he, "for the unquestioned guardianship of our beautiful Zelda Vanderpoer."

Nesta started forward to interpose, but the detective caught her eye with a confident look, and she drew back in obedience to his gesture.

"So let it be," said he. "I am agreed."

But now Zelda sprang forward.

"It shall not be!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "You shall not sacrifice yourself in such an unequal, such an inhuman contest! Oh, sir, I entreat—I beseech—"

She was recalled to herself by a swift look of warning, followed by a blank stare.

"You, indeed, honor me, until a short space ago a perfect stranger to you, fair maiden," said the detective, with a well-assumed surprise, "in manifesting such an interest in my welfare. But compose yourself. This is no novel contest with us Gypsies of the Pyrenees."

"Be ready," said Leomeister in a low but audible tone to Gogo, who was helping him to hold back the bear. "Pedro will kill him in one minute, if we are not watchful."

"Hold on there!" cried Black Jago, hauling a handful of notes and coins out of his pocket. "I go my pile on the man."

"And I on the bear!" "I, too!" "The bear must win!" "Don't let them fight!" "It ain't fair!" "Yes, 'twill be rare sport!" "Two to one on Bruin!" and so on, cried a hubbub of voices.

While the bets were being made the bear was loosed.

He launched his huge bulk upon his human

adversary with an exasperated growl, for Gogo had secretly sprinkled red pepper in his ears and under his tail.

But his rush was evaded in a flash, and then he was writhing in the terrible side-hold of his more agile and intelligent opponent.

There was a terrific struggle.

Pedro roared afresh, but his mighty mitted paws only beat the unresisting air with their furious strokes, and slowly but surely the tremendous grip of the detective was working its remorseless way around to the rear of the hairy brute.

At last his golden opportunity came.

By an apparently incredible series of dextrous efforts, the detective dropped on one knee, tightening his grasp as he did so till Pedro's very ribs were heard to crack.

Then, as the huge forms tottered over backward, a final effort hurled it completely overhead, and to the bottom of a steep declivity, where, striking his head on a sharp stone, the bear lay motionless.

It had all been done so quickly and cleverly as to hardly seem like reality.

Black Jago was the first to run down to the bear.

"He is dead!" he called up, exultingly. "Neck's broken clean as a whistle! My money's good!"

It was true.

Conrad and Gogo both examined the body, from whose mouth and muzzle the dark life-blood was gushing; but poor Purring Pedro, the Russian performing bear had appeared in public for the last time.

Leomeister passed the victorious detective while the latter was putting on his coat and waistcoat.

"You have won, and I submit," said he, in a subdued tone of genuine sadness. "I loved the poor brute and would sooner have lost many a fair young woman than he."

Zelda and Mildred had gone into their tent at a sign of the Gypsy princess.

The latter approached the pseudo bear-fighter of the Pyrenees, with sparkling eyes and a rich color in her dark cheeks.

"The maiden will be guarded against any attempt at treachery or bad faith, Zingarino John Perez," said she. "I would like a few words with you alone."

He bowed, and followed as she led him off through the woods.

When they had reached a secluded spot at some distance from the encampment, she suddenly confronted him, extending her hand.

"How are you, Mr. Circus Detective Griplock Crimmins?" said she. "What do you think of yourself?"

CHAPTER XXI.

NESTA'S PASSION.

UNMASKED as he was, the detective did not change a muscle.

A single glance into that glowing face, those brilliant eyes, convinced him that to deny his identity would be useless.

"How long have you known that it was I?" said he.

"Almost from the first."

"And you have not denounced me as a spy?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Nesta's color deepened, and she bit her lip.

"I have brought you here to tell you that."

"Tell me, then. Why have you not denounced me?"

"Because I love you."

There was no shame in the avowal—such an unusual one from a fair maiden's lips; only a rushing change of color in the soft cheeks, a quiver in the tempting, partly-compressed lips, a tumultuous bounding of the superb bosom.

A Queen of the Gypsies may not be judged by the fastidious standards of our social etiquette.

Without coxcombry on his own part, the detective had suspected the existence of this unfortunate passion, though the suddenness of its declaration was no less startling than the abruptness of his unmasking.

His embarrassment was extreme; but she helped him out of it.

"You are not rejoiced at my avowal," said she sadly, "and I am not surprised that you are not."

"I regret but one thing at the present moment—deeply, sorrowfully regret it."

"What one thing do you regret—that I love you?"

"Not that mostly—though that is indeed most sad."

"What, then?"

"That I love another."

"Ah, the fair Zelda."

"Yes."

"Why regret that?"

"Because, otherwise—"

"Well?"

"I should return your love—I should be so proud, so happy in its possession."

"Ah! and, without that interposition, you could return it?"

"Madly, passionately, devotedly!"

"Why?"

"How can I say. With Zelda's image absent

from my heart, you would be for me the most beautiful, the most fascinating of women."

The inscrutable look that had puzzled him before returned to her face.

"I should rejoice to hear you say this," she murmured.

"You?"

"Yes; next to the reciprocation of my passion, it should rejoice me dearly."

"Why?"

"Because your Zelda is in my power."

"What of that?"

Her eyes flashed.

"Can you ask? Am I not a Gypsy—passionate, fearless, remorseless?"

"You are something more—a true woman."

"But she is in my power; I could slay her."

"And make me loathe you."

"True; but a rival would not possess that which I crave so madly—your love."

"You are mistaken; Zelda would still possess it."

"Even if I should kill her?"

"Even then."

"One loves not the dead."

"Some would, myself of the number."

"I do not understand."

"My love for Zelda is of the soul; such love can hope, trust and wait. It is imperishable."

Here was a spirituality little familiar in the heart-experience of a Gypsy queen.

"Ah!" said she, with an indescribable loss and bitterness in her tone; "even were it possible for you to return my love, you would not love me in that way."

"I would."

"No, no; your love for me would be of the body, not of the soul—if there is such a thing, which I doubt."

"You err. I could love in no other way."

A sudden storm of passion and bitterness swept over her.

She wrung her hands, while pressing them tightly to her heaving breast.

"Oh!" she moaned; "what madness, what folly is mine. Such a love possible, and to be denied me! I, the wanderer, the nameless, the despised, to dream of love at all! Madness! idiocy!"

"It is not so, Nesta. Such love as that of which you are capable must win a return, of which you will be proud and happy. Your beauty—"

She furiously interrupted him.

"Enough of that!" she cried, harshly. "Let alone my beauty. It is my bane, my curse, since it wins me not what I desire—your love!"

He was silent.

"Besides, that, under any circumstances, is all that you could admire in me—my beauty, which is but of the body and the surface. The soul, of which you rave, would be wanting."

"It isn't true. But keep on depreciating yourself if you choose," said the detective, doggedly. "Reasoning with you is useless."

She burst into a wild laugh, but was almost instantly self-possessed, with a return of the inscrutable look.

"Let us be reasonable, then," said she. "Can you imagine why I have brought you here to make my confession to you?"

"I cannot; unless it were to overthrow my plans."

"Not so. It was a pleasure merely to tell my love, hopeless as I knew it to be. Then might I not be capable of a self-sacrifice?"

He took her hand.

He raised it to his lips, but with a gravity and respectfulness that did not cause the quickening of her pulses by so much as a heart-beat.

"You are capable of anything, Nesta," said he. "The possibilities of any nobility and of any revengefulness are in your grand composition. It lies altogether with you as to which shall have sway."

Her manner softened immeasurably.

"Fear not, friend," said she. "The wicked and the spiteful in my nature are not my masters. A truce to all this. The Villemessant story—is it a myth?"

"Certainly not. The advertisement you saw to be genuine."

"I refer to its application in Zelda's case."

"It is a myth—that is, I think so; I am not so sure of it since my last interview with her."

"And your connection with the executors and the next of kin?"

"All sheer fabrication."

"And yet Zelda is still high-born and an heiress, as I understand it."

"She is. Her adoptive father assured me of it."

"And the secret of it all is in those stolen papers, now in Conrad's hands?"

"Yes."

"Did he murder the show-master, think you, to obtain them?"

"I haven't a doubt of it—he, or Gogo, at his instance."

"Are you not afraid that he has the whip-hand of you in possessing those papers?"

"Not at all; merely the whip-hand of Zelda's name and fortune."

"And these are nothing to you?"

"Of course not, as compared with her heart, which is mine."

There was a flash of her first bitterness and despair. What was she losing and resigning? The simplicity of the man's love made it grand.

"And the recovery of the papers," she went on, "would fling her, with the addition of wealth and honors, in your arms?"

"Yes."

"Would it do more than that?"

"It would bring the assassin to the gallows."

"But that would not be proof enough."

"There are others."

"What are they?"

The detective hesitated, looking her full in the eyes.

"You can trust me," said she. "What are the other proofs?"

His hesitation was at an end.

"Kalulah's handkerchief, found on the fatal spot; a shred of Gogo's exhibition dress; the knife, stamped with the owner's initials, with which the murderous stab was made."

"Ha! Conrad's own knife?"

"No."

"Whose then?"

The detective was silent.

"What, mistrust again?"

"Not mistrust, Nesta."

"Why hesitate, then, to tell me who owned the fatal knife?"

"You will not like to know."

"I? Absurd! What to me? The knife was not Leomeister's?"

"It was not."

"Whose then?"

"Center-pole Jack's."

"My brother! Great God! and I have heard of him as one of Conrad's intimates."

Her face had blanched.

"Be of good heart, Nesta," said the detective, kindly. "John Vincent seems to be mixed up with the mystery, but I have good reason to believe that he is wholly guiltless of complicity."

"Heaven bless you for those words! My poor brother! Such a charge might go hard with him. He fled from England for killing a man."

"I have no doubt that the knife was stolen from him before the date of the murder."

"Ah! you relieve me. So the chief thing now is the recovery of those papers from Leomeister?"

"Yes."

"You shall have them. At all events, that murderous hound shall not terrorize the girl."

"It is my turn to thank you for your words, Nesta. But Leomeister is cunning. We must be cautious."

"Trust my Gypsies for cunning."

"But will he remain in the encampment, after what has chanced?"

"Undoubtedly. He has no notion of resigning the girl."

"I'll look after her."

"We shall all look after her—I especially," said the Gypsy queen, generously, and she gave him her hand.

"Noble woman!"

"Not at all. I merely do nothing by halves. But there is another danger to Zelda, which perhaps you overlook."

"I have not once lost sight of it. You refer to Mildred?"

"Yes; she helped me to escape from the hotel."

The detective laughed.

"It was arranged by her father and me that you should escape."

"You don't mean it?"

"I do."

Nesta looked vexed, but presently also smiled.

"I'd sooner be whipped than overreached," said she, candidly. "Well, Mildred insisted on coming with me."

"I shadowed you the entire distance."

"What, that too?"

"Yes."

"We made a midway house to rest. Did—did you overhear our conversation?"

"I was compelled to."

"Well, I shouldn't blush for my own part therein now. Were you interrupted in your pursuit of us?"

"Yes; first by two men at the mouth of the ravine." He briefly described the incident. "Who was the occupant of the little hut on the river-bank?"

"A tough old ruffian, of Gypsy mothering, and in affiliation with our tribe."

"And the big fellow who aided him."

"A tell rascal whom I had posted there."

"I am glad to know that."

"Why so?"

"I feared it was Center-pole."

"And that my not having seen him from childhood a mere pretense?"

"Yes."

"Ah! that was true enough. My dear old brother Jack. He was father and mother to me, and the handsomest Gypsy-man in England. Could we but be together again!"

"You shall be. I shall make that my business."

"You will do that?"

"Yes."

"Thanks in advance. How happy I shall be! It will be next best to having your—I mean, something better." And she laughed a little discordantly. "But to return to Mildred."

"She will not harm Zelda."

"Still, the girl is insanely in love with Leomeister."

"While Zelda loathes him as a reptile and a fiend. How long can jealousy be cherished in such a case?"

"Not long, I grant; though Mildred is fool enough to do something rash before she becomes aware of the true state of things. Hush!"

She suddenly grasped the detective by the wrist, and drew him down into the covert they were occupying.

"Look!" she whispered, pointing away through the underbrush. "Tell me what you see."

"A monstrous serpent—one of the largest I ever saw!" gasped the detective. "I can only see its body in part—shifting and glistening in the checkered beams—but that is enough. A tremendous snake!"

"Say you so? I think otherwise. Wait!"

She drew a short, heavy horsewhip from her girdle, and then, after first creeping in pursuit, fairly bounded forward, with an enraged cry.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CASKET AGAIN.

EVEN the quick eye of the detective had been deceived for the moment.

The "monstrous serpent" was nothing more than the eavesdropping spy Gogo, in his elastic exhibition dress, the better to facilitate his stealthy movements and intentions.

But the serpentine twistings and agility of the Man-Snake did not save him now.

Griplock followed the Gypsy princess to find her gripping the fellow by his long neck, and plying her horsewhip to him with a vengeance.

Indeed, her long-restrained emotions seemed to rejoice in finding this unexpected object on which to expend their fury.

"Dirty spy! accursed, sneaking villain!" she exclaimed, punctuating every syllable with a knout-like stroke. "Thou shalt have a lesson to remember me by. Aha! well may you squirm. There is pith in the Romany arm, is there not, my *sap-engro*?"

It was a terrible castigation.

Gogo writhed and wriggled under it like a roasting adder, but without emitting so much as a whimper.

She only ceased from weariness.

"Back there, and squirm, hideous reptile!" she panted. "But for my Gypsy blood, I could admire thee for thy sufferings."

Gogo rolled himself into a coiling, squat attitude, shifting his scales, blinking his eyes and darting out his tongue.

"It is my turn," said Griplock. "He may have the clew to the silver casket on his person."

In a moment he had the Man-Snake in his clutch, and was manipulating his stripes and spots with the searching dexterity of an expert.

"Before the Lord, Mr. Crimmins!" hissed Gogo. "I know nothing of the casket."

Griplock paid no heed, but presently looked up.

"I must beg you to retire," said he to Nesta.

"Why should I go?"

"There is something concealed underneath the costume. I am about to skin the snake—in other words, it becomes necessary to strip Gogo."

"Oh! I shall await you at the edge of the encampment."

A moment later, in spite of Gogo's protestations, the detective had succeeded in denuding him of his artificial tegument, peeling it down from the heels, and the Man-Snake was as naked as when his infantile personality first startled his unfortunate mamma.

The only thing discovered was a small, peculiarly-shaped twig, with the leaves intact, which had been packed away under the small of the back.

Greatly disappointed, the detective flung the costume to the naked man, who snatched it and darted away with furious articulation between a spit and a hiss.

"What came to light?" asked Nesta, when the detective had rejoined her.

"Only this."

To his surprise, she seized upon the twig with eagerness.

"It is witch-hazel," she exclaimed—"the true witch-elm, and there is but one meager clump of it in this vicinity. This may indicate the casket's present hiding-place."

The detective was instantly all alert.

"You think so?"

"I feel sure of it. Quick; follow me. You gave Gogo his freedom?"

"Yes."

"That is unfortunate. Still we may be in time. Hasten!"

She was leading him briskly across the camp, and, at a word from her, Black Jago had joined them.

Both Zelda and Mildred looked after them with wonder from the door of their lodge, as

* *Sap-engro*, Romany for snake-master.

they were seen to disappear at a run into the thick woods.

"Where can they be going?" cried Zelda.

"What can it mean?"

"How should I know? Look!"

And Mildred pointed to the lodge occupied by Leomeister and his remaining curiosities.

Gogo had just darted out of it, his hastily resumed costume flying into ribbons here and there, and both Conrad and Kalulah, the latter also *en costume*, were after him in a sort of panic-stricken run.

They were instantly lost in the wooded mountain-side at nearly the same point where the others had disappeared.

"Something extraordinary must be up," said Zelda.

"Something extraordinary always seems to be in order hereabouts."

"But it must now touch Leomeister nearly. He was whiter than when Grip—Perez killed his bear for him."

"How you hate Conrad!"

"And how you love him—more's the pity!"

"Why is it a pity?" said Mildred, sharply.

A better understanding had already been established, though poor Milly's temper was still none of the best.

"It isn't only that he's a bad man—utterly unworthy of you," said Zelda, gently. "It isn't that altogether, Milly; but that you might do so much better."

"Ah, indeed!"

"Yes; and not go far, either."

"What do you mean?"

"Another man."

"Of course; but what man?"

"The very tall Gypsy; he hasn't taken his eyes from your face when you have chanced to be visible."

"That black giant?"

"He is uncommonly swarthy, but a magnificent-looking fellow."

"A Brobdingnag!"

"With eyes like sloes."

"A common Gypsy!"

"He is of the blood royal—Queen Nesta's own cousin."

"Still, a Gypsy!"

"But so romantic!"

"He shall not look at me."

"A cat may look at a queen."

"I shall tell Conrad to forbid him."

"Would Conrad forbid him?"

Mildred blushed. She had to confess a doubt in the matter to her own heart. Already was a true sense of shame—womanly shame at having pursued a man, and that an unworthy one, against his inclinations—wholesomely at work in her composition.

"I think he would," she replied, meekly.

"Then I would not tell him of it, if I were you."

"Why?"

"Because, however friendly they may have been, Black Jago is not now on the best of terms with the lion-tamer, or I am mistaken."

"What of that?"

"Black Jago looks as if he might be dangerous on occasion."

"Conrad can hold his own against any man in the world."

"You will except one."

"What man?"

"Griplock Crimmins, the Circus Detective."

"Yes," admitted Milly, "one must needs except him. I wonder what has become of him, that he is not on your track."

Zelda heaved a sweet little hypocritical sigh.

"How should I know?" she murmured.

"May he not have forgotten you?"

"Not he!"

"But there is one man of whose prowess the Circus Detective himself might be fearful."

"What man is that?"

"The Spanish Gypsy, Perez, who killed the bear."

Zelda smiled.

"I think you are not far cut there, Milly," said she. "Perez, as an athlete, must be the Circus Detective's equal, but not his superior."

"But how can that be determined without a match between them?"

"I doubt if such a match could ever be brought about," said Zelda, evasively.

In the mean time, Nesta, flying through the woods, had led her followers, Griplock and Black Jago, to a wild bank, craggily overhanging a deep forest pool.

The pool was formed by a considerable mountain stream, and had its outlet in a wild cascade, leaping over a natural dam of logs and rocks.

The craggy bank, at one point overhanging the water, was thickly grown with witch-hazel, interspersed with some old forest trees.

"Here we are at last," said Nesta, coming to a panting pause at the edge of the copse. "Now let us see."

She was studying the odd-shaped twig taken from Gogo, and comparing it with the witch-hazel branches and sprays about her.

Black Jago, who had been made acquainted with the object of the search, added his observations to hers.

The detective could only look interestedly on,

woodcraft not being one of his accomplishments as compared with that of those strange children of nature, the Gypsies.

"I have it," said Black Jago at last.

He took the twig from Nesta's hand, and fastened it neatly to a branch from which it had, to all appearances, been originally torn.

Fastened thus, as originally grown there, it corresponded precisely with two similar twigs, one above and one below.

All three pointed unerringly, like so many skeleton fingers, or little weather-vanes, in one direction.

In fact, this feature of the ragged parent-bough rendered it distinguishingly characteristic from its environments.

"An old trick of concealment with poachers," said the Gypsy man. "Now let me follow it up."

He stood directly behind the three pointers, waited till not a breath stirred, and then ran his eye along the same line, as if sighting something with a rifle.

"All right!"

He strode straight on through the wood, heedless of intervening brushwood, branches, and tangling vines.

Presently he brought up, about forty feet away, directly before a young oak, that had been blighted by lightning.

"This is it," said he, slapping the scarred trunk with his mighty palm. "The pointers single out this, and this alone."

Nesta and Griplock had followed him.

"Only a tree," said the latter, with a disappointed air.

"Wait," said Nesta, smiling. "Maybe it is something more."

"Yes," said Black Jago. "No game has been hung in its branches or buried at its root, as might be the case in an old-country preserved forest, for instance. That is certain. The stem looks sound, too, but that is to be found out."

He drew a short-handled forester's ax from his belt, and began sounding the trunk of the tree.

Presently the pounding sound evoked a hollow response.

"The tree is hollow on this side," said he. "Ah, yes; look up there." He pointed to what looked like a squirrel's hole high up among the upper branches. "There is the communication. A precious object, dropped in up there, would remain safely concealed almost in the very heart of the trunk until chopped out by the concealer, or by the finder, as the case might be."

"Chop into it," cried the detective, not a little amazed at these woodcraft tactics. "Gypsies should be detectives, and nothing else. Chop away!"

"That is just what I am going to do, Zingarino Perez; though, for a Gypsy yourself, your comments are not a little surprising."

The disguised detective was close-lipped enough during the chopping after exchanging a glance with Nesta, as much as to say. "He may come into our secret sometime, but not just yet."

The chips flew under the skillful blows.

An immense one, at last displaced, showed a hole big enough for a hand to be thrust into the cavity beyond.

Something glistened.

The Circus Detective drew it out with a shout.

It was the silver casket!

CHAPTER XXIII.

BAFFLED AGAIN.

THE precious casket was in his hands at last.

Its glittering monogram flashed in a sunbeam that seemed to have darted through the overhanging branches especially to play upon it.

But before he could reperuse its characters, while his strong clutch was about to open the box, he as suddenly lost it again.

Crash! descended a great tree almost upon their heads from near at hand.

As the trio recoiled, the Man-Snake darted between Black Jago's legs, upsetting him on the turf; simultaneously the lion-tamer's grip closed on Nesta's wrist, rendering her powerless; and a swift hand—a hand at the end of a beautifully rounded arm—leaped from the underbrush, snatching the treasure from the detective's possession.

Then Leomeister and Gogo had disappeared, as if by magic.

Nesta was freed, Black Jago on his feet, Griplock once more on the alert.

But the casket was disappearing in the direction of the pool, in the Mermaid's hands.

"After her!" cried Griplock, with an oath. "Surely we can overtake her. She is but a girl!"

But Kalulah was in her scaly, tight-fitting submarine costume, affording her the utmost freedom of movement, and she was naturally fleet of foot besides.

She was destined to prove a "scaly customer" in more senses than the literal one.

As they dashed in pursuit, the green and gold of her Girl-Fish costume came and went in flashes amid the trees and the undergrowth.

The scene suggested a veritable mermaid, or rather a naiad of the brooks and waterfalls, flying from mortal admirers.

But Black Jago, especially, was swifter of foot than a coursing stag, Nesta was an oread for speed, and furious chagrin lent wings to the detective's feet.

They were gaining on the fugitive at every leap.

At the overhanging brink of the deep pool she came to a sudden pause.

But it was only for an instant.

They bounded toward her with outstretched hands.

With a low, mocking laugh, she disappeared headlong into the watery depths.

The water was of crystal clearness, enabling one to see the bottom with singular distinctness, and the girl's plunge had not clouded it in the least.

The baffled pursuers threw themselves at full-length along the bank, and peered anxiously into the pellucid abyss.

She was resting on one arm at the rocky bottom, after her languid, professional manner when at the bottom of the tank.

Her long hair was floating dreamily in long, feathery tresses around her, her nymph-like shapeliness shifting and shimmering lazily.

The intervening water-space was so transparent that they felt prompted to call down to her, with a certainty of receiving a silvery response from out of the liquid coolness.

The casket was still in her hand.

She kissed it, waved it up toward them with a tantalizing smile, and then slipped it into her bosom.

Was there ever, at least in modern times, a nymph so provoking and vexatious?

Suddenly she disappeared.

Griplock sprung to his feet.

"Useless! lost again!" he exclaimed, striking his forehead with his clinched hand. "She is in her element. It is play for her, toying down there in the deep water."

"But she must come up again some time, or drown!" cried Nesta.

"Not necessarily. You see that she has disappeared?"

"Yes."

"Well, the girl is an amphibious marvel. She has doubtless come to the surface ere this through some subaqueous cave, or down there under the dam of the cataract. Come; let us go there and see."

They skirted the pool, and descended at the side of the cascade.

Here, at the foot of the jagged rocks and logs, the water spouted, shot and tumbled in a hundred jets and streams, rushing away down the precipitous gorge in shouting froth and spume.

As they reached the bottom, a silvery laugh came to them from far down the ravine.

It was from the Girl-Fish, vanishing away like a laughing Undine of the wilds.

Griplock had said truly.

She was in her element—an amphibious marvel.

A parting glimpse was caught of her lissom form, tossing away in the rapids like a foam-wreath, as though a part of it, and she was gone.

When the baffled casket-seekers reached the encampment again, an hour later, Leomeister and Gogo had disappeared with their traps and properties from their tent, leaving word that they would not be likely to return.

Kalulah was not with them, and had not been seen since her prior evanishment.

"Leave them to themselves," said Nesta, with an assumption of indifference. "As long as Zelda is with us, they are sure to turn up again."

A subsequent examination showed that the tree, whose fall had so disturbed the casket-seekers in the brief flush of their triumph, was an old and rotten one, long since carelessly abandoned after being partly cut through. A strong push had doubtless sufficed to cast it down.

Griplock's arduous and swiftly-succeeding adventures now necessitated a repose, which he was glad enough to take.

There was more than the customary cheer around the Gypsy camp-fires that evening.

It was accompanied by the odors of roasting flesh-meat, and there was something like a small festival.

The occasion was a grand feast that the wanderers were making out of the remains of Purring Pedro; and Black Jago was carefully dressing the bide, with a view to future profits at some county fair.

Neither Zelda nor Mildred had been visible since before noon, and the general impression was that they were taking a long rest in retirement after their exhaustive march of the preceding night.

"The young ladies ought to be aroused," said Nesta to Griplock, upon the latter making appearance. "They must be hungry."

"Send Grandmother Merka to fetch them out," said Griplock.

"She has been with them since this morning. I knew there could be no better guard for Miss

Zelda than she, and she was eager to undertake it."

"Ah, yes. There was gold in the girl, gold in her! Merka would not have lost sight of that."

Nesta hurried to the tent that had been occupied by the young women.

She had no sooner entered it than she came out again, looking pale and unsettled.

She beckoned Griplock and Black Jago to go in.

They did so.

Zelda and Mildred were gone.

Their guardian, the Gypsy hag, was dead.

She lay on the ground, a black, strangling circle round her throat, her body distorted, her hooked fingers in the air, as if vainly clawing at the last gasp after gold, gold, impossible gold.

A slit in the dingy canvas where it backed up against the dark forest line showed where the young women had been secretly dragged away, probably after being chloroformed, for there was a lingering smell of the drug about the place.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NESTA'S MAGNANIMITY.

AT midnight the hue and cry was over.

The Gypsies, including Griplock, were regathered in their encampment, after a long and unsuccessful search after the missing girls, Leomeister and his minions.

For from the very first it had been decided that the lion-tamer had been instrumental in the disappearance of the young women and the murder of old Merka.

It was a mystery how this had been effected in broad daylight, with Gypsies, male and female, coming and going every few minutes in the vicinity of the fatal tent.

And from the general outlook, it was a mystery that would probably not be solved with dispatch.

The mountain paths had been ransacked by eager searchers, than whom there are no better woodcraftsmen, especially by night, in all the world, and without the discovery of a single clew.

At dawn of next day the Circus Detective, who had been allotted a share of Black Jago's tent, was awakened from his uneasy slumber by a soft hand passing caressingly over his brow.

He sat up to perceive Nesta sitting by his rude couch.

She was attired for the road.

Her thick scarlet cloak was fastened at the throat by a heavy gold ornament; her statuesque figure was mournfully silent in the dim light; strong but well-fitting shoes were on her shapely feet; the black eyes and lovely features that looked out from under her traveling-hood were troubled and set.

"What, Nesta, it is you?"

"Yes, my friend; it is I."

"You have been weeping."

"Even Gypsies may weep though not often, my friend, Zingarino Perez."

There was the ghost of a smile on her lips at the fictitious name.

"Who shall chide your tears?" said the detective. "Zelda and Mildred, even you might have come to love them."

"I mourn not for the young women, my friend, although their disappearance is most sad."

"I forgot; poor old Merka. The ties of blood are strong with you Gypsies."

"I have not wept for my grandmother's death, Griplock. What was writ was writ, or she would not have found her doom."

"Why, then, have you shed tears, Nesta?"

"Because most probably we must part, you and I."

"Part?"

"Yes; unless you will go with us."

"Are you breaking camp?"

"We have already broken. We await but the sunrise to lay my grandmother away in the earth, after the ancient custom of our people, who mayhap were sun-worshippers of old. Then we go."

"But whither?"

"To avenge her death."

"Ah! on Leomeister's track?"

"Yes."

"But that is also to be on Zelda's track."

"Doubtless."

"Then why should we part, you and I, Nesta? My path is yours."

"We go straight over the mountains to the great railroad town far beyond."

"What of that?"

"You may want to return to the circus, and thence make your way thither by rail."

"Not I. Give me but a messenger, to send word to my employer, Mr. Isaacs, and I am with you."

"You would do so?"

"Yes; Leomeister seems so familiar with the mountains that I have the impression he will not desert them."

"Still—"

"Why do you interpose objections, Nesta? Is it that my remaining with you is distasteful?"

Her troubled looks increased.

"It is not that. Distasteful! Ah, no. What a word!"

"Perhaps you are becoming to mistrust me."

"Mistrust! Oh, my friend!" and her passion burst forth; "do you forget that it is my misfortune to love you? Do you not see that I fear myself—that now it would be wrong for me to keep you with my hand—now that *she* is no longer with us?"

It was an unexpected manifestation of delicacy and honorable feeling.

The detective was deeply touched.

He took her hand and pressed it.

"You are a noble woman, Nesta. But it is best that I should accompany you on this search. Zelda and Mildred shall be found, their murderous abductor brought to justice, and you and I shall be strong in our mutual trust. Obtain me the messenger I require; I will rejoin you at once."

She snatched away her hand. Then she seized his hand, pressing it to her lips, and was gone.

When he rejoined her, the remains of old Merka had been laid to rest, and the Gypsy caravan was on the move, the tents of the encampment having disappeared, as if by magic, some time before.

The route was by a wild wagon-track, across and through the wooded mountain-land to the northeast.

Nesta was walking beside her van, accompanied by Black Jago.

Griplock joined them, after sending off a Gypsy girl as his messenger, with a brief note, to Mr. Isaacs.

As he came up, Black Jago extended his brawny hand.

"We shall find them," said the latter, moodily. "Conrad may be hardy and desperate, Zingarino Perez, but the Romany lads are hard to beat in mountain-land or greenwood."

"You think him familiar with this district?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Why are you sure of it, Jago?"

"Conrad consorted with our tribe in England when Nesta here was but a child. He and I and John—King John, Nesta's brother—were much together, poaching, trading, looking out for the main chance, fighting and exhibiting at the fairs."

"Ah!"

"Yes. We, John and I, knew little of America then, save by hearsay. But Conrad was never tired of talking of it. Especially would he praise these Catskills, as he called them, and we concluded that his boyhood must have been passed among them."

"He must have come early, then," said Griplock. "By birth, I am sure he is a foreigner."

"Very likely. Well, our tribe have been in America several years. A few days ago Conrad met me in the town where the show is now exhibiting. He arranged with me to help him carry off the young lady. He was to pay our band five hundred dollars, to aid in her concealment, until he should be able to make her marry him."

"Ah!"

"That is all done with now," interposed Nesta, hastily. "Conrad is perfectly familiar with the Catskills; that is understood."

"Yes, and we must run him down," continued Jago, with an oath behind his teeth. "Curse him! it shall be to the death."

"Yes, to the death!" said Nesta.

"Merka shall be avenged: the young women rescued."

Griplock eyed the tall Gypsy keenly.

"You admire Zelda's companion," said he.

"Confess it."

Jago's eyes flashed and his white teeth glistened.

"She is a lily of beauty, and I have never married," said he, suggestively.

"Is it permissible for Gypsies to marry out of their tribe?"

"Permissible? Pough! But it is sometimes done. I don't mind confessing to you, comrade, that a smile from the blonde girl—not that I've received one, by the way—would be like gold in my purse, or a rich jewel to my heart."

"I trust you may win her," said the detective, heartily. "For a Gypsy, you are a good one, and anything for the girl would be preferable to her infatuation for Leomeister."

It was a rather left-handed compliment, but Jago accepted it with a grateful smile, though Nesta was not pleased.

"That shall be cured after we hang Conrad," said he, complacently. "I understand the whole thing. He has bewitched her. But I shall shake the witchcraft out of him, and then I have a potent love-powder that Grandmother Merka once gave me. It shall make me bravely beautiful in Mildred's eyes."

Griplock could not help laughing.

"You have got it down pretty fine," said he.

"Have I not, brother? Oh, it takes a Romany man to manage a love affair, brother!"

"Cousin Jago, you are a fool!" said Nesta, sharply.

They both turned to her.

"Why, what now, Nesta?" said Jago, in surprise.

"You are an idiot!"

"Of course; but you said that before."

"It will bear repeating. A more thorough-paced, unmitigated Gypsy fool never loved the moonlight!"

She joined another group, leaving the pair to travel alone.

Griplock found opportunity to be with her alone presently.

"Why were you angry with your cousin?" said he. "His simplicity was merely amusing."

"Perhaps so; but I wasn't chiefly provoked with him."

"With me, then?"

"Yes."

"But wherefore?"

"Oh, yes! I suppose you spoke so complacently of my race that I ought to feel honored."

"The deuce! but what did I say?"

"You ought to know."

"But, for the life of me, I can't remember."

"You said, 'For a Gypsy, you are a good one,' and so forth."

The detective felt a too-late remorse for his careless words.

"Forgive me, Nesta!" said he. "It was recklessly brutal, but I did not mean the words, or think of their meaning. Their injustice—"

"They weren't unjust, but only hurtful to my feelings," she interrupted. "That should have deterred you."

"Of course it should, brute that I am! But the words were unjust, too."

"Not so, I tell you! Oh, do you think me such a fool as that oaf, Jago? I know my people to be what they are—chicken-stealers and fortune-tellers—'vermin of the country-side,' as some Englishman has dubbed us! But I don't exactly take it as a compliment; that is all."

"Unjust, I repeat! The individual, not the race, should alone be considered. Let us talk of the business in hand, Nesta."

"Good, then."

"Kingston, is the large town for which you are heading?"

"Yes."

"It must be a two days' journey by this rough mountain route."

"All of that."

"What are your plans?"

"There's a wild succession of glens a little this side of Kingston. It is called the Dismal Valley. Conrad is familiar with the locality. My people and I know it well. He is making for a secluded cabin there, now most likely deserted, though once occupied by an old half-Gypsy, sister of the short, thick man, at whose hut you once obtained a lantern."

"So; and you think Conrad will take the young ladies there?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Yes; with Mr. Vanderpoer's death on his soul, he would be likely to shun the towns and their constabulary hereafter."

"Like enough; though it isn't for that that my people and I shall pursue him, as he well knows."

"For what, then?"

"We are Gypsies. My grandmother was little loved, but her corpse would poison the earth unless she were avenged."

"Ah, I understand."

"Not quite, I think. The vengeance need not be hastened. There is much to be secured before that, though not on the account of my people and myself."

"On whose account, then?"

"On yours."

"Mine?"

"Yes."

"You were right, Nesta; I do not understand."

"Zelda is first to be restored to your arms; the casket containing the title-deeds to her name and fortune recovered."

"You mean it?"

"In my heart I have sworn it!"

Her voice was emotionless.

He looked at her in unqualified admiration and respect.

"Noble woman! your magnanimity is overpowering."

"Pshaw! I have none."

"None! Why, you are a heroine! Such consideration for Zelda and her rights—"

"Man, man! Can you not, will you not understand?"

There was a mournful intensity in her voice and manner now.

But when was there man otherwise than obtuse in the love of "that strange mystery, a woman's heart?"

"But what am I to understand, Nesta?"

"That I can do nothing for Zelda and her rights—that but for one thing I could trample them under my feet, and exult in the destruction—that it isn't out of any friendliness to her that I subordinate my hereditary vengeance to her interests!"

"Out of what, then?"

She hesitated, a world of passion, of tenderness and of agony leaping for an instant into the dark beauty of her face.

"Out of my hopelessness, my despair, my love for you!"

She hurried into her van, or covered cart,

and was not seen again until the halt for the night was made.

The following evening a more permanent camp was made at the Dismal Valley, the wildest and most lonely part of the Catskills they had yet reached.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DISMAL VALLEY.

THREE days passed without any signs being discovered of Leomeister and his party, but without weakening Nesta's and Jago's conviction that he was lurking somewhere in the Dismal Valley.

"The valley is twenty miles long," said Nesta, in answer to Griplock's solicitude, as yet another band of searchers came into camp with the monotonous report of non-success. "It is also as crooked as a ram's horn, parts are hardly accessible, and there may be many a deserted cabin in it that we know nothing about. Patience; we shall run down our game at last."

On the preceding day Griplock's messenger to Mr. Isaacs had returned with an answering letter.

Herein the show-master had expressed the hope that Zelda and his daughter would be speedily restored to his care, little the worse for their rough experiences, and urging the detective to spare no time or expense in effecting that result.

The show was doing badly at the time of writing, and the proprietor, after canceling all intermediate dates, had engaged the great show-building of the American Institute, where he expected to open in New York City at the end of the week.

He concluded as follows:

"Of course, I have had to engage some new attractions, and with these I hope to make up for past losses. But they can scarcely fill the vacancy caused by the loss of the trapeze performances, in which my daughters and that able scoundrel, Leomeister, made such a success, and by the absence of Zelda in her unexampled horsemanship. Of course, the former is permanently lost to me, as I never want to see Conrad again, save to see him hanged. But Zelda's return might do much to reinstate me. So you will see the advantage of exercising both wisdom and thoroughness in your researches. Draw on me for whatever you require."

Griplock gathered from the tenor of the entire letter that Mr. Isaacs was losing faith in the reality of the silver casket and its contents, or at least in their recovery.

As a matter of course, this did not please him, but at the same time he was growing more and more alarmed on Zelda's account, as the days passed without any sign of her whereabouts.

He began to doubt the wisdom of his determination to remain with the Gypsies in their vengeance quest.

But on the morning of the fourth day after their arrival at the Dismal Valley, a young Gypsy, who had been feared as having lost himself in the mountains, came into the camp looking half-dead with fatigue and privation.

A few minutes after her interview with him, Nesta sought out the detective with a hopeful face.

"Ansel was not wholly lost," said she. "He has seen Conrad, and had a long talk with him."

"Where?"

"In a small hut, far back in the valley."

"Were Zelda and Mildred with him?"

"No; only Gogo and Kalulah."

"Where were the young women?"

"In another small hut, not far away from the first, and keeping house together, Conrad said, but he wouldn't say exactly where."

"What would he say?"

"He has grown fearful, and wants to treat with our band, to pay blood-money for Grandmother Merka's death."

"He acknowledges having killed her, then?"

"Not quite. He says her death was an accident—wasn't intended."

"Ah!"

"Gogo killed her while the girls were being chloroformed, as a first step to carrying them off. He choked her a little too hard; that was all."

"Naturally enough; the Man-Snake is a strangler, if nothing else."

"I think it very likely that it chanced in that way; though death is death, and it would make no difference with the band."

"I suppose not. But how could the young ladies have been carried off out of the camp in broad day? I don't see how it was effected."

"I do now, from what Ansel has learned. Conrad and his satellites were all prepared for departure before they set after us at the witch-hazels. While we were being fooled by Kalulah, Conrad and Gogo hurried back to camp. Departing thence, with their belongings, they halted in the woods."

"Ah! and then slipped back for the captives."

"Yes. The thick woods coming close to the back of the tent enabled them to slip in, unperceived by outsiders, or perhaps even by the inmates themselves for the instant. Chloroform did the rest, and Merka, offering to alarm the camp, met her death."

"So; and Leomeister is now anxious to compromise the affair?"

"Yes."

"Would the Gypsies entertain the proposition?"

"Not for an instant. All he could offer would be a few hundreds, while they still have unbroken faith in you and in our joint guardianship over the Villemessant heiress, which may ultimately mean as many thousands."

"I see. Then he is not to be treated with at all?"

"Oh, but he is!"

"In what way?"

"Leomeister seemed anxious and troubled to a great degree. He knows what Gypsy vengeance is. When Ansel told him that all the money he possessed could not condone for Grandmother Merka's murder, he hinted that yet more might be forthcoming to effect the compromise."

"More?"

"Yes; yet more—the surrender of the casket itself, and its contents, provided he might retain Zelda in his power for one month."

The detective started.

"He made the proposition outright after a while, though only hinting of it at first."

"What more?"

"Ansel is shrewd. He pretended to think that this proposition might be entertained."

"Well, what do you propose?"

"To hoodwink Conrad by keeping up the impression. His passion for Zelda has doubtless overmastered every other consideration. He is even ready to resign her fortune, if he can have her; cheating himself with the hope that in a month's time he can overcome her repulsion, and induce her to marry him."

"That is it."

"He expects a messenger from our hand to-night with an answer to his proposition."

"How would I do?"

"Not at all. Probably, long ere this, he has suspected your true character."

"You think so?"

"Without a doubt. You remember what Gogo may have overheard when I horsewhipped him."

"I had forgotten."

"Moreover, before that, your victory over the bear must have given away your secret."

"True."

"The most fitting messenger to treat with Conrad shall be forthcoming, my friend; have no fear for that."

CHAPTER XXVI.

ANOTHER SELF-SACRIFICE.

GRIPLOCK had no doubt that she referred to Black Jago, who, next to herself, was unquestionably the most intelligent Gypsy in the band, and he said no more, though seriously anxious over the complicated aspect the affair was taking on.

A few hours later, when he again saw Nesta, she was radiant.

A Gypsy girl, who had been to Kingston, had thought of inquiring at the post-office for letters, out of a mere freak.

The result had been a letter for Nesta from her long-absent brother, John Vincent, otherwise Center-pole Jack, with which she had just returned.

"See!" cried Nesta, proudly exhibiting the scrawl. "Have I not occasion to be happy? He has quitted the circus employment, and is coming to me. He will be here before midnight of this day. He calls me his little Nestina, just as of old. He will be one of us again. My brother is a good brother. He need never fear the Bowstreet runners again here in these free mountains and with us. I am so happy! Ah, my friend! there is other love than lover's love for a poor Gypsy's desolate heart."

Her new joy seemed to have transfigured her.

She was like an artless young girl with unexpected sweet tidings.

Her joy seemed to refine and spiritualize her.

The detective gazed thoughtfully into her lovely and mobile face, from which every sordid suggestion, as the inheritance of a sordid though mysterious race, had vanished away, as an imperfection in a rose under the genial sunshine and the refreshing dew.

Had he never known Zelda, he might well have loved this beautiful being, proud and rejoicing in the devotion he had inspired.

She had in some way achieved some education, while, as to the nobility and refinement of some of her instincts there could be no doubt.

She seemed out of place, and was yet a Gypsy of Gypsies to the core.

After congratulating her on the gratifying news she had received, he obeyed a sudden impulse.

"Nesta," said he, gravely taking her hand, for they were again alone, "have you any religion?"

She looked at him with a half-puzzled expression, and then smiled, shaking her head, and kissing her brother's letter for about the fortieth time.

"I don't mean," he explained, "to ask whether

you are Christian or heathen, Jew or Gentile, but whether you believe in God and a hereafter life."

She shook her head again.

"That is madness, not sense," she replied.

"We Gypsies are of the beautiful earth, and we return into her bosom when we die. But I am very happy, because my brother is coming back to me."

And then she ran away.

But when he saw her again, toward evening, her face was clouded, and she seemed secretly troubled.

"Do not worry," said she, gently. "The messenger to confer with Conrad will set out after dusk."

"What after that?"

"If the messenger returns with the casket, the whole band shall be guided to Conrad's hiding-place, and the pretty Zelda taken from him. It will be a good time to wreak our revenge on Conrad, too; otherwise my grandmother's body will poison the ground."

"Bad faith, that!"

"That is nothing."

The detective reflected. He could await developments, without committing himself to the proposed treachery, which was little enough to his liking, even where Leomeister's undoing was concerned.

"Zelda's companion, Mildred," said he; "they are together, then?"

"Yes; but Conrad will have nothing to do with her. She was only taken along to keep Zelda company."

"When will the messenger return?"

"By daylight; if not, a search-party will follow in force. Such is the agreement."

"It is a dangerous mission to be undertaken alone. Who has been selected as the messenger?"

"A fit person, Griplock. Can't you rely upon my judgment?"

"Of course."

"Good-night, then."

She held out her hand with a sudden paleness, which escaped his notice.

"What? so soon? It is barely twilight."

"Yes; good-night, my friend."

Her good-night had become familiar to him, though heretofore given at a much later hour.

"It is her caprice," he thought, "or perhaps she is not well." And he took the proffered hand with his customary smile.

As he looked back after separating from her, she was still standing in the door of her little tent, regarding him strangely.

It was not the same look that had puzzled him once or twice at their first acquaintance, though an equally inscrutable one.

What was mixed up in that look? Sorrow, fear, tenderness, premonition, despair, foreboding, love? Perhaps one and all of these, and yet more.

It haunted him.

An hour or two later, when the camp-fires had nearly died down, he saw the flicker of a lantern moving off, silently, steadily down into the Dismal Valley.

"It is the messenger to Conrad," he said. "Good luck to him!" And he sought his repose.

He was awakened an hour before day by an unwonted commotion in the camp.

The long-errant wanderer, Center-pole Jack, had returned to the camp of his fathers, and was in a towering rage because his princess-sister, the little Nestina of his early days, was not there to welcome him.

"What is the matter?" said the detective, coming up. "Nesta must surely be in her tent."

The new-comer did not recognize him in his disguise.

"Not she," cried Vincent. "She was expecting me, and yet they have let her go off alone on some dangerous mission. If aught ill befalls her, I shall kill every grown man in the tribe—ay, even making a beginning with yourself, Black Jago!"

A sudden revelation rushed upon the detective.

All—Nesta's strange reticence, her last hand-pressure, her mysterious look at parting—all was plain now.

"What do I hear?" he cried, hoarsely. "Was Nesta the solitary messenger to Conrad's retreat?"

"She would go," said Jago, doggedly. "I begged and begged to be let go in her stead, but without avail. I'll leave it to Ansel, who also wished to go."

"It is true," said Ansel.

"Dispatch!" cried the detective, inspired by a sort of panic that was new to him. "There is danger! We must go after her at once."

"It is not yet dawn," said Jago. "That was the hour she fixed for a search, against her failure to return."

"No matter! It will not do to wait. Ansel shall guide us. Hurry!"

Center-pole Jack grasped his hand.

"I like you, stranger," said he. "We will lead the quest together."

As the expedition was about starting, Ansel placed a letter in the detective's hand.

"To be given you, sir," said he, "in case she failed to come back."

A letter from Nesta!

Seeking momentary retirement, the detective broke open the missive with trembling fingers.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MILDRED'S STORY.

"MY FRIEND:—

"I am the messenger for two reasons. *First*, because I feel that I alone can deal successfully with Conrad, if success be possible; *second*, because I have sworn to restore Zelda and her property to you, or die in the attempt to do so, and I must keep my oath. But I am full of sad forebodings. However, if I perish, my life will have been laid upon the altar of my love. Ah! if I could but see my brother John first before I go. But it is not to be, and the sacrifice will be all the greater. Farewell, my beloved, perhaps forever. If forever, think kindly at times, in the midst of your happiness with the woman of your heart, on the poor Gypsy."

"NESTA."

Read with emotion, mastered with reverence, the letter fell from the detective's hands.

A poor letter, a pitiful letter—scrawled in pencil on the loose fly-leaf of a book—half-legible, misspelt—but oh! what a world of pathos and womanliness throbbing and sentient in every line.

The letter fell from his hands, and a single tear, the first of Griplock Crimmins's manhood, fell after it, a tribute to the noble heart that had passed into danger, perchance unto death itself, for his sake and for love's.

Then he was with the searchers, stern, resolute, and the party were moving up through the Dismal Valley, by lantern-light and the glimmer of the fast-paling morning stars.

Well had the valley been named, and well had it been described as crooked as a ram's horn and almost inaccessible in places.

The sun was hours high in the heavens before the densely-wooded, precipitous upper end of it was even approached.

Without Ansel's guidance, the dim path would have been imperceptible, and it was a wonder how Nesta could have pursued it, even with her Gypsy training and instincts.

There were several of the Gypsy women and girls who had insisted on accompanying the party.

At last the winding path brought them along a rocky ledge to the door of the miserable hut where Ansel had found the lion-tamer.

Though found to be empty, an ominous spectacle presented itself to such as were enabled to crowd into the interior.

Evidently a desperate, hand-to-hand struggle had but recently taken place.

Such rough articles of furniture as the hut contained were scattered and broken.

On the white-washed rough wall, directly over a rude, broken cot-bed, were these words in red letters, obviously marked thereon by a trembling finger in its own blood:

"GONE—NEW YORK—GONE—NEW YORK—GONE!"

What terrible significance was here?

As it seemed quite impossible that the words could refer to a person *in extremis*, as the writer of those words had doubtless been, the detective's advice that the neighboring hut or cabin, in which Zelda and Mildred were said to have been confined, should next be sought for, was eagerly heeded.

Not an extremely difficult task, even in that savage solitude, and without any previous knowledge to direct them, where a number of Gypsies were concerned.

Before long Black Jago came upon a masked footpath not far distant.

It led them to the door of another hut.

A wild-cat leaped, with a spit and a scream, out of the half-ajar entrance, and disappeared, as the searchers approached.

A similar scene was presented by the interior.

The furniture, of a better quality, and including a small cooking stove, was likewise in fragments.

Rolled in each other's arms on a pallet in one corner, were the forms, apparently lifeless, of two young women covered with wounds and bruises.

They were the forms of Nesta and Mildred.

Not a trace of Zelda was to be found.

Mildred was discovered to be still feebly breathing, and in a sort of stupor.

While she was being cared for by the Gypsy women, Center-pole Jack silently took the companion form in his arms, and sitting down with it under a tree, rocked back and forth, like a mother with her dead baby, silent and tearless in his misery.

But none was more powerfully affected than the detective, although none equaled his iron self-control.

He took the poor hand that was hanging limply over the bereaved brother's shoulder.

Suddenly he started, giving a joyous exclamation.

"It beats!" he cried. "The pulse beats! Quick! water—brandy. She is not yet dead!"

Vincent looked up with a wild, haggard look.

A spring of ice-cold water bubbled near, and brandy was, fortunately, on hand.

Instantly Nesta was also under the ministering hands of some of the women, her brother and the detective hanging over her with stern anxiety.

She had suffered terrible injuries, chiefly about the head with some blunt instrument, though there was also a deep knife-gash in the shoulder.

But apparently the skull had not been fractured. Some brandy, forced between the clinched teeth, seemed to restore her vital energies considerably, though without bringing her back to consciousness, while a plentiful application of water caused her to move a little, and then to rest more naturally.

The superb maidenly form was statuesque amid its injuries, and, barring the disfiguring gash, the bared shoulder and arm would have inspired an artist's dream.

"She will live," said Griplock, who had been pressing his hand to the still motionless breast. "I am sure of it. The heart beats but faintly, and yet with steadfast regularity. She will live!"

In the mean time, the other sufferer, who was found to have sustained much fewer and less painful injuries, had so far recovered as to sit up and look around her with a dazed expression.

A couple of the Gypsy girls had been especially attentive, and Black Jago sat before her, holding both her hands in his own.

She did not withdraw them at first, but slowly did so with a grateful pressure as realization dawned upon her.

Presently she was so far restored as to look about her intelligently, and she beckoned the detective to approach.

He did so.

"You are still very dazed," said he, taking one of her hands.

"No; not dazed—no longer dazed," she faintly answered.

"Still very weak, though?"

She nodded.

"Could you tell the story of what has happened?"

She shook her head.

"I am afraid not."

"Perhaps it were better to question you; you could answer?"

"Yes, yes!" with feeble eagerness.

"Where is Zelda?"

"Carried off. Leomeister—Gogo—Kalulah!"

"Was she also maltreated?"

"No; that is, not beaten, not bruised, not battered."

"Carried off in a faint?"

"Yes, yes; she had fainted."

"How came you and Nesta alone together?"

Mildred motioned for a drink of water.

It was given her mixed with brandy, and, after swallowing it, she was much stronger and more coherent.

"Nesta came running to our hut deep in the night, or early in the morning," was gradually drawn from her. "Zelda and I were asleep, but, being aroused by her clamoring, opened the door for her. Nesta was an awful spectacle. She was frightfully battered, and covered with blood. In one hand, pressed to her bosom, was the silver casket."

"Bar the door against them!" she gasped out. They are coming, they are after me—Conrad, Gogo, the murderers! But first, hide this. Zelda, it is yours, it is the key to your name, your fortune. Hide it before they come. It will make you, it will make Griplock happy, when I am dead!"

"While she was forcing the casket into Zelda's hands, I was closing and barring the door behind her."

"It was too late. I had only partly succeeded when it was burst in by Leomeister and Gogo, Kalulah following behind them."

"They were bruised and bloody—the two men, I mean—and furious with rage. Nesta fearlessly confronted and fought them. I aided her. What became of the casket I do not know, but Zelda fainted at the first. A blow from Gogo laid me senseless. When I recovered, Zelda was gone, the assailants with her. Nesta, apparently lifeless, was at my side. I took her in my arms, and tried to revive her. While doing so I again lost my senses. That is all."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

SUCH was Mildred's terrible story; complete enough as far as it went, but still unsatisfactory.

"Listen, Mildred," said the detective, after she had finished. "Did Nesta have time to say nothing more before the ruffians broke in the door?"

"No, nothing more. There was no time. It was all like a series of flashes."

"Some words had been scrawled in blood on the wall of the other hut, doubtless by her finger, before she quitted it."

"What words?"

"These: 'Gone—New York—Gone—New York—Gone!' Have you an idea what they referred to?"

"None whatever; I can't imagine. But stay; there was something else."

"What do you mean?"

"Something else she held in her grasp besides the casket—a paper, or letter. It fluttered away as she was pressing the casket into Zelda's hands. Oh, my poor mamma! my poor father! what will they think? That villain, Leomeister! that murderer! that wretch!"

She ended weakly in a flood of tears, and as Jago again possessed himself of her hands she did not attempt to take them away.

Griplock had suddenly disappeared into the hut.

When he again appeared it was with a look of increased satisfaction upon his stern face.

"My friends," said he to the Gypsies, "we must lose no time in making litters, and carrying the injured young women to the encampment. Their injuries can be attended to much better there than in this wild spot. After that I must go to New York, whither I am convinced the ruffians have fled with their captive. I shall stop over at Kingston, however, and secure the services of the best physicians and nurses. Let us delay no longer in quitting this place."

His words were good ones.

Half-an-hour later, Nesta and Mildred were being borne back to camp.

Three hours after that, Griplock had dispatched the doctors and nurses to the encampment, and was on his way from Kingston to New York by rail.

In his pocket was a crumpled letter, stained with Nesta's blood, which he had found on the floor of the hut in which the final struggle had occurred.

It was as follows, written in a plain business hand.

"OFFICE,
86 CHERRY STREET,
NEW YORK, JUNE 12.

"MR. CONRAD LEOMEISTER, Kingston, N. Y.:"

"Yours received. I have just the rooms, furnished and strictly secluded, that you require."

"They are high in the air, perfectly isolated, and so situated that their very existence as a place of residence could not be suspected from the outside."

"Call on me and take possession at your pleasure."

"Money deposit received, and it shall also secure the strictest secrecy on the part of,"

"Yours respectfully,
SAMUEL TOPHAM."

The date of the letter was two days old.

Arriving in New York in the middle of the night, the detective's first step was to seek the American Institute building.

The Universal Circus, Menagerie and Roman Hippodrome was already in possession, preparations having been nearly completed for opening on the following night.

From the night watchman connected with the show, he learned what hotel Mr. Isaacs and family were putting up at.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, he at once proceeded thither, and was fortunate enough to find the show-master in the elegant bar-room, convivially engaged with a number of professional friends.

All were somewhat taken aback by the shabbily-dressed, Gypsy-looking man who was seen to approach their group with an air of quiet confidence.

But an intelligent sign from the new-comer was sufficient to enlighten at least one of their number.

"Why, it's Griplock!" almost shouted Mr. Isaacs, and the next instant the detective's hand was in his genial grasp. "Good Lord! the sight of you is good for sore eyes, man. Where have you been? When did you get here? How are the runaways? Wife's half dead with anxiety. Kitty's gone on Spezzi. Business looking up, though. Have a drink. Let me introduce you—good fellows—friends of mine—all of 'em have heard of you. Do have a glass of wine, if nothing else!"

But the disguised detective not only declined to join in the festivities, but looked so grave and stern that shortly afterward the show-master was occupying a room with him apart.

Here the nature of the adventurous and excited tale that was unfolded to him was such as to leave no room for extraneous reflections.

"Astonishing! amazing!" was nearly all he could at first ejaculate in the way of comment. "Poor Milly! poor Zelda! And that hound, Leomeister—good God! his fiendishness is like a chapter from the Dark Ages. And that Gypsy young woman, too—what a trump she has proved herself!"

"That doesn't fairly characterize Nesta," said Griplock, reverently. "The girl is simply heroic—a pure star in an otherwise forbidding firmament!"

"Yes, yes; to be sure. And Milly—the deuce! if she were five years younger I'd spank her black and blue. But"—anxiously—"you think she will get over her injuries?"

"Yes, and more too."

"What do you mean?"

"She has already got over Leomeister—that is what I mean. Her infatuation for him has turned to disgust and hate."

"You don't say so? Gad! the best news yet."

"But the cure may also be objectionable to you."

"What has cured her?"

"A better man."

"Ah, of course! might have guessed it. Who is he?"

"A gigantic Gypsy, Jago by name, and a cousin of Nesta, who is the princess of her people."

"You surprise me. Gypsy be— However, any cuss in shoe-leather would be an improvement on that hell's imp, Conrad. What's he like?"

"Loyal, simple, loving, and I think fairly honest—as Gypsies go."

"Ah! they don't go a great way."

"He is also an athlete of prodigious strength and activity. With proper training, he might be made a 'feature.'"

"That's better—much better! Well, well; I sha'n't kick, if the old woman doesn't. Dear me, dear me! so you really broke Purring Pedro's neck at his own game of bug-chaw-and-swipe? A good feature, too, that bear, and no mistake. However, he was Conrad's private property—curse that devil! Roasting's too good for him, even with Gogo as kindling-wood. Another capital feature, too, that same Malay, Gogo. Only Man-Snake before the public. Before Vanderpoer parted with him to Leomeister, half a dozen rival shows were hot to get him. Well, well, well! And Kalulah, too. She's another. Gogo's sister. Wouldn't suspect it, from her complexion and good looks, would you? Of course not; no one ever does. And our little Zelda. Sharp trick, that Villemessant dodge, you played on 'em. So you think she is now in New York."

Having let the old showman run on uninterruptedly as the best means of exhausting his volubility, Griplock answered the last question in the affirmative, and produced the Topham-Leomeister letter.

"So, so!" said Mr. Isaacs, looking over the missive a little hazily. "Explicit enough, I'm sure, if the writer will only squeak, as to the locality, which is doubtful. What is your next step?"

"Rest and repose. After that, to ferret out the new hiding-place."

"Good enough. Take your own time. Of course, you'll stop at this hotel?"

Griplock glanced at the elegant appointments around him, then down over his coarse coat, stableman's waistcoat and leather leggings.

The showman understood, and burst into his hearty laugh.

"Oh, you're all right!" he cried. "What! do you fancy I would forget to fetch your wardrobe, along with our own trunks, from L—?"

"What! you did me that service?"

"I should say so. George Isaacs never forgets. You shall have a bath, a room to yourself, and your own trunk in it, inside of ten minutes. Now will you join me in a bottle?"

Under the circumstances, the detective cheerfully agreed to break with his abstemiousness for that occasion.

"It's all in the family, my boy," beamingly continued the old showman, rubbing his hands as the wine was produced. "And the luck will have changed from this hour. I feel it in my bones. I see a boom in the show-business right ahead. Your health!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A MISSING LINK.

GRIPLOCK breakfasted with the show-master's family at a fairly early hour.

Mrs. Isaacs and Kitty had greeted him with sincere effusiveness, though the latter was a little shy, notwithstanding that he was necessarily more than ever a hero in her eyes, from the recital of his more recent adventures at second-hand.

But Signor Spezzi, who also managed to be present, it was easy to see, had reached a very friendly footing in the young lady's good graces, and he was more devoted than ever, with tenfold his former hope by way of encouragement.

Kitty was disappointed, however, in her longing for a private chat with regard to the particulars of her sister's escapade, as the detective was absorbed in the business in hand, and lost no time in effecting a rapid disappearance as soon as the repast was at an end.

A little later, still somewhat disguised as to his true character under the outward seeming of a New York exquisite of the first water, he stood before Mr. Samuel Topham, in the latter's little Cherry street office den.

Mr. Samuel Topham was a little foxy-faced, bald-headed real estate owner, was his own agent, and his miserable office, in an up-stairs corner of one of his own tenement-houses, was in all literalness a den—"only that, and nothing more."

"I am in search of a suite of furnished rooms of a peculiar character, sir," said the stylish visitor, with languid suavity. "I have been recommended to you as being likely to answer my requirements."

"I've got rooms and rooms—lots of 'em," said Mr. Topham, engagingly. "Who recommended you to me, if it's a fair question?"

It was one that the detective was prepared for.

He laid before the little man a business card, obtained at the solicitation of an up-town friend, bearing the name of a certain undeniably notorious Harlem real estate agent.

"Humph!" said Mr. Topham. "Pretty good of — to send you to me. However, I once did him a good turn—that is, I once abstained from skinning him when I had the chance to do so—and he doubtless means it as a sort of reciprocation. Your own name, if you please?"

The man of leisure twirled his mustache, and smiled.

"I prefer to remain *incog.* in this little matter."

"Oh!"

"Yes. Should you have what I want, six months' rent will be cheerfully paid in advance."

"That's business. Sit down, sir—not that chair; the rush-bottomed one is a little less shaky. Now, sir, what sort of rooms do you want?"

"What have you got?"

"Anything, from a shoemaker's hole to a howling swell's *petit boudoir* for the ballet-girl of his heart. Too many to enumerate."

The visitor nodded approvingly.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you could hit me off," he observed, selecting a cigar from a jeweled case. "A match, if you've got such a thing."

"Oh, yes; here you are. By the way, you say you want peculiar rooms?"

"Y-a-a-s."

"Suppose you tell me what you want them for; then I'll know soonest if I can suit you or not."

"Cheeky, by Jawve! However, why not? It's a case of a couple of young ladies and their brother—particular friends of mine, specially the girls—and must be kept shady. I may say deucedly shady."

"I understand, sir. Nothing to be known in the neighborhood—just as if they did not exist, eh?"

"Exactly."

"Spies to be feared, yet to be hopelessly baffled? Angry fathers at a discount, indignant mammas not wanted?"

"You've struck it."

"Particular as to nearness to down-town?"

"Not a bit."

The man of bricks and mortar knitted his brows.

"I had something just to your liking," said he, after a pause. "Unfortunately, they, the rooms I refer to, were taken three days ago."

"What are they like? The description might give me an idea."

"Five rooms in the top story of an enormous factory building. Superbly furnished. Former factory proprietor a queer fish—student, living all alone, and wanting to be thought out of town. A discreet family might live there a year without even the factory hands suspecting it. Ceilings and walls thick; windows enormously high. Man or woman might be murdered in 'em, and not a squeal heard. Neighborhood sparse; policeman complacent, like living in a cemetery."

The visitor sat up in his chair, his face fairly radiant.

"Just the thing!" he exclaimed. "Give me the address; I must have a look at those rooms."

"Do you no good; taken, as I told you."

"So you did. What a beastly bore. No chance for me, eh?"

"No; not in that quarter. A party from up the Hudson secured 'em three days ago; deposit received."

A party from up the Hudson. The detective was now almost sure of his clew.

"How beastly unfortunate!" he exclaimed.

"Might I ask, for general information, what price such rooms command?"

"Sixty dollars a month," said Mr. Topham, mendaciously doubling the actual price without so much as a blink.

"Bless me! is that all? Cheap at a hundred, I should say."

Topham's eyes glistened.

"Let me see the rooms. Six hundred cash for half a year's occupancy, if they suit my purpose."

"Can't—rented 'em—business honor."

"Maybe I can buy off your new tenant, then. What's his name?"

"Can't give it; he's as desirous of secrecy as you are."

"The deuce! give me the address then. I'll see him at the rooms."

"Can't."

"Not even the address?"

Topham fidgeted in his chair.

"No, sir," said he, desperately. "There's the charts of the various premises I own," pointing to a bunch of diagrams on a file. "Anything else you're welcome to. But these premises are engaged, *sub rosa*. No more's to be said, sir!"

"What!" with a look of admiring awe; "you really own all the houses and lots represented by that stack of diagrams?"

"Yes, sir," complacently. "My total of real

estate is all represented in that pile. Them with black crosses on 'em is rented; them that's blank isn't. It's all simple enough."

"How easy-going you big property-lords are! I must have those rooms. Let me make you a proposition."

"What is it?"

"There's a district telegraph office that I noticed around the corner. I'll stay here while you run out and communicate with your new tenant. See what he'll sell back his bargain for. I'll double you on anything he says."

"By cracky! I'll do it."

He clapped on his hat, locked up his safe, and scarcely looking behind him, disappeared.

The next instant the detective was running over the file of diagrams for all he was worth.

They represented all sorts of lots and buildings, and there were a large number of them.

With nothing but the black crosses to guide his discrimination, however, the detective continued his search with astonishing rapidity.

At last he selected one whose general appearance seemed to correspond with the property in question.

Before he could examine it in detail, however, the door was suddenly opened.

He turned with a guilty start, but at once uttered an exclamation of gratified surprise.

It was not Mr. Topham, but Mr. Gaston Larue, who had surprised him in his surreptitious search.

"Give over that, Mr. Crimmins—you won't find what you want in that way," said the newcomer, hurriedly. "Trust in me to help you out. I'm here for that purpose. Mr. Isaacs gave me the cue. Quick; return to your seat—there's a step on the stair!"

The detective had just time to settle himself in his primary languid attitude when the real estate cormorant returned, looking hot and angry, as if having missed a choice chunk of carrion by a hair.

"The man won't listen to me!" he exclaimed, snappishly. "Swears he'll have the law on me if I telegraph to him again. Dash it all! some men are just that unreasonable—Who the deuce are you, sir?"

The last words were addressed to Larue, who, hat in hand and looking as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, was now for the first time discovered.

Larue bowed and presented a card, purposely letting the detective catch a glimpse of its face.

It was Conrad Leomeister's professional card, with all printing save the name itself erased.

"Oho!" And Mr. Topham glanced confusedly from one visitor to the other. "You are not the gentleman whose name is on this card?"

"No, sir. I am the young man with him and the two young ladies. I am here from him."

"What does he want?"

"The plumbing is a little out of order, and some thicker window-curtains are needed."

"Enough, sir! I sha'n't spend a shilling in repairs. Tell Mr.—I mean your master—that from me. It was so understood in the contract. By cracky! I—"

"Softly, softly, sir! My master asks you to expend nothing. He is perfectly willing to make the repairs at his own expense."

"Oh; quite a different matter."

"Yes, sir. And being new, not only to the neighborhood, but to the entire city, he begs that you will recommend to him both a plumber and a curtain-hanger in his near vicinity, upon whose workmanship and honesty he can depend. But their places of business must be in his near vicinity, if you please."

"Oh, certainly, to be sure. Why not?"

Topham picked up a couple of cards and a lead-pencil.

Then, suddenly recollecting himself, he pointedly bade his visitor good-morning, but in the expressed hope that he would take the trouble to call again.

CHAPTER XXX.

A DEATH-TRAP.

THE detective eyed him contemptuously, and then coolly took his departure with a look of high-bred displeasure.

"You have ventured to trifle with me, sir," said he, as he disappeared. "You will not see me in your vile fly-trap again, I can promise you. Pah!"

The foxy little man colored with vexation, and then polished up his baldness excitedly with his pocket-handkerchief.

"Now, how absolutely unreasonable some folks are!" said he, sort of appealingly to Larue. "What do you suppose that dude is sniffed over?"

"I can't imagine, sir. Did he want to get house-rent for nothing?"

"No, no; not so bad as that—though not a great way from it. He wanted to overbid your patron, Mr. Leomeister, and chisel him out of his bargain in the matter of those rooms."

Gaston let fall his hat, he grew pale as ashes, and his knees knocked together.

"Good Heaven, sir!" he ejaculated; "you didn't go and give him our address or mention any names, I hope. My master is that particular as to secrecy that—"

"Compose yourself, young man; I'm a man of my word—nothing has been divulged. You want these craftsmen's addresses to be near at hand, you say?"

"Yes, sir; as near as possible."

"That's all right. Neither shop is more than a block or two away. Here you are."

He handed him the cards, on each of which he had written an address.

"My respects to Mr. Leomeister, young man; and say to him from me that he ought to be a good tenant. I could have sold out the contract over his head to-day for a pretty bonus; but an agreement's an agreement and I abstained."

"Yes, sir. Good-day, sir."

"A clever trick, Gaston!" exclaimed the detective, when the secretary joined him on the street a few minutes later. "What made you think of it?"

"You left Topham's letter to Leomeister in Mr. Isaacs's hands, and Mr. Isaacs was good enough to explain its history to me. That suggested the subterfuge I have just executed. Here are the addresses, sir."

Griplock examined them.

One was that of a curtain-hanger and upholsterer on the corner of Avenue A and Forty-eighth street; the other that of a plumber in the same cross-street at a number that indicated a close vicinity to the East River front.

"Come, now," said the detective, "this is decidedly better than nothing. It generally localizes our man, at all events. Did the old fellow drop any extra hint?"

"Only that neither shop was more than a block or two away."

"The avenue blocks are big ones, but there's nothing like trying."

"I think we shall find the house without any trouble," said Gaston, who was not familiar with New York thoroughfares and distances.

The experiment did not justify his faith.

The plumber's and the upholsterer's were found without any difficulty, but the search for the house, from the vague description they had of it, proved to be altogether hopeless.

There were many huge factory buildings, but none that seemed likely to have the gorgeous living apartments at the top, as described, and of course they could not venture upon any but the most guarded inquiries.

They were about despairing when Gaston's slender fingers suddenly closed warningly on the detective's arm.

Obedient to the caution, the latter at once sidled with him into a convenient doorway.

It was on East Forty-ninth street, near the river, and the thoroughfare was crowded with tenement-house life and mid-day traffic.

At the same instant a man sauntered past who riveted their attention.

An odd face, bristly-bearded to the eyes, but there was no disguising the snakish glitter of the latter nor the writhing, gliding walk.

It was Gogo.

"After him!" whispered the detective. "You on the opposite side, I on this. Don't lose sight of him, but be prudent."

Gogo was accordingly shadowed.

What was he up to?

He seemed to be abroad for neither business nor pleasure, and yet he would occasionally pause to look into a shop-window, or study a sign-board, but only to suddenly wheel in his tracks and take in his general surroundings with a lightning glance.

He feared just what was happening, his being shadowed, and was resolved to guard against it.

That was what Gogo was up to.

As he made one of these sudden wheelings, soon after passing along the river front, he came in contact with a polished exquisite, who flew into a great rage over the accident.

"Ouf! you should look where you are gadding," cried the stranger, brushing his coat disdainfully with his kid-gloved hand. "Are you used to taking up the entire sidewalk with your zigzag blunderings?"

Gogo returned the angry stare with interest, then muttered something in apology and hurried on.

Presently, when he seemed to deem the coast clear, he darted into the staircase entrance of a towering factory building standing somewhat alone.

A moment later the fashionable stranger, who was none other than the detective, had followed after him, accompanied by Gaston Larue.

"We've struck our trail," whispered the former. "The building stands isolated, just as was described."

"True; but there are others similar."

"But only one, with the Man-Snake leading the way. Be cautious now."

The stair-flights seemed wholly deserted.

They stole upward.

It was the hour of noon. The throb and rumble of machinery in the adjoining floors had ceased, and they could occasionally hear the voices of the workmen at their mid-day lunch.

Open hatchways extended up through the floors in close connection with the stairways, both series being walled off from the main interior by wooden partitions, with a communicating door at each landing.

The ascent was such as gave no hint of sumptuous living-rooms on the top floor, but this contrast had been alluded to by the discreet Mr. Topham as an additional recommendation.

But the building was nine stories high, and upon the eighth landing being reached a listed door closing the next entrance up seemed to promise success beyond.

The detective had been in the lead, but, upon passing through the listed door, he motioned to his companion, who was the lighter of foot, and Gaston slipped on ahead.

This flight was decently carpeted, instead of being bare, and the partition wall differed from its predecessors in having once been painted.

Gaston had gained the topmost landing like a phantom, and was turning to signal the detective that all was propitious, when suddenly a look of horror leaped into his face.

At the same instant he mysteriously disappeared, as completely as if he had melted into air.

The detective, who was closely following, was startled, but retreat was not a word in the bright lexicon of his make-up, and his hand was already on the butt of his hip-pocket revolver.

"What could have so startled Gaston?" he thought. "Had he chanced upon the murdered body of poor Zelda at the very threshold of the secret rooms?"

Then, with a noiseless leap, he cleared the remaining step.

The carpet strip at the top was jerked with such suddenness as his foot fell upon it that he was tripped up and thrown on his back.

Then he felt a noose thrown over his shoulders, pinning his arms to his sides, and he was being dragged, like a lariatied colt toward the open hatchway, while Leomeister's demonic voice sounded in his ears.

"Dupe and fool!" it cried; "you have found your doom. Gogo recognized you on the instant, and you have been lured into the wrong building, but one that answers our purpose equally well. Down to perdition with him."

Then there was a hissing laugh—the Man-Snake's laugh—and the trapped detective was beyond noting anything more.

For an instant he was dancing on the air, then the noosing rope was cut, he turned half-over, and went plunging down into the nine-storied abyss.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SPEZZI IN A NEW ROLE.

BUT the hoistway-rope, which had been gathered to one side of the openings, and thus escaped the notice of the would-be assassins, dangled, nevertheless, all the way down to the lowest floor.

The noose had, moreover, become loosened from around the detective's arms by the cutting of the connecting line.

By a tremendous, mid-air effort, he managed to clutch at the hoistway.

His first hold slipped, peeling off his dandy gloves and skinning his hands, but still it was enough to turn his body feet downward, and break the force of his plunge.

A second attempt was more successful. He retained his clutch of the main or windlass rope, and even succeeded in twining it with his legs.

This chanced when about two-thirds of the way down, and it was thence a matter of comparative ease to let himself down, hand-over-hand, to the bottom of the shaft.

A cry of baffled fury came from above; then the topmost hatch was closed, and all was still.

The detective was safe, even comparatively uninjured, though badly shaken up.

What had become of Gaston? Had he secreted himself from, or been captured by, the same assassin hands? In either case, wouldn't it be wisest to at once summon the police or the factory hands, and have Conrad and Gogo taken in custody before they could escape by the stairways? No; for in what way would that reveal the prison-house in which Zelda was hidden away?

As these reflections chased each other through the dazed detective's brain, there was a descending scurry on the stairways.

He supported himself against the partition and grasped his revolver.

But before he could draw it, Leomeister and Gogo flashed by him through the street entrance and were gone.

He slowly followed, being in no condition to take up the pursuit.

A subsequent study of the water-front presented a number of other lofty, comparatively isolated buildings, very similar to the one in which he had been so cleverly entrapped.

But they were entirely too numerous for a personal examination of the topmost story of each to be thought of, while any system of inquiry would be likely to place the wary and murderous enemy once more on his guard.

Still wondering what could have become of Gaston Larue, the detective was turning his back on the neighborhood in bitterness and disappointment of spirit, when he almost ran against Mr. Samuel Topham.

"Bless me! here we are again," said the little

man, genially. "How do you chance in this vicinity, my dear sir?"

"Business—business!" was the languid reply, with a nod at a real-estate office that luck chanced to place near at hand. "You see, I am still room-hunting, and thought something of applying at this office."

While speaking, he managed to conceal the palms of his hands, which were still somewhat lacerated and bleeding.

"Nonsense!" said Topham. "Those chaps in there haven't anything that would suit you. Come to see me again to-morrow. I had no intention of offending you when you went off in such a huff."

"Ah, oh, that's all right! But why not put me on the track of something else on the spot?"

"Can't, possibly; too busy. Well, well, interview those sharks, if you choose. You will find I've said nothing but the truth about them. Come to me to-morrow, if you don't get suited. Good-day."

And the little man stepped briskly away, seemingly most preoccupied, as Griplock slipped into the real estate office.

But the latter's move was only a pretense, as a matter of course.

A moment later he was closely shadowing Topham, feeling almost certain that the latter was bent on visiting his new tenants of the undiscovered air lodgings.

But he was again disappointed. Mr. Topham forthwith proceeded to the neighboring ferry, paid his fare, and was seen to enter the boat, as much preoccupied as ever.

The detective was turning away, when his attention was arrested by a trimly-dressed, fine-figured young lady, intently examining a flaring show-poster.

The poster was a flaringly artistic one—one of the many already advertising the Universal Circus, Menagerie, and Roman Hippodrome throughout the metropolis and its suburbs.

The young lady was the ex-Girl-Fish, Kalulah. "Oho! I have you, my dear," thought the detective. "But how much more gladly would I have spotted the house out of which you must have newly emerged."

He also found occasion to be attracted by the poster, after assuring himself that the young woman had no suspicion of his identity.

Since the defection of Leomeister and his living curiosities, Mr. Isaacs had made a move toward supplying their places by engaging a fresh sub-aqueous wonder—a man-fish, duly trumpeted as infinitely surpassing every similar prodigy; and it was the picture of this performer, billed as Ching Lung, the Japanese Merman, in the act of smilingly diving for pearls in a pea-green ocean, with a preposterous pig-tail floating out behind that had naturally enough riveted the ex-professional's criticism.

Her bosom heaved and her lip curled.

At last, with a contemptuous sniff, as much as to say, "What is a man-fish good for with a public that has hung entranced upon the performance of Kalulah, the human amphibian of the universe?" she hurried away.

"This is the opening afternoon of our show, and I know just where to look for you there, my charmer," said the detective to himself. "Any fresh clew is better than none."

He accordingly went to a barber-shop, to doctor his hands and have himself dusted off, then had lunch at a restaurant, and finally headed for the show, it being now nearly two o'clock in the afternoon.

Mr. Isaacs was in the vicinity of the ticket-office, his face wreathed with smiles.

It was a faultless opening day. The public was pouring into the show in shoals and swarms.

He grasped the detective's hand.

"Give me joy, my dear fellow!" he chucklingly whispered. "The Universal's bad luck is about to be wiped out by a season of unexampled prosperity. You must let me wine you a little."

Griplock submitted to being led to the adjoining refreshment-room, at one end of which those temperate and ubiquitous individuals, the members of the press, were enjoying a free lunch, with liquids galore, at the show-master's expense.

"We've caught on, my boy, fairly caught on!" continued Mr. Isaacs, genially rubbing his hands while a bottle for two was under way.

"In fact, the show is doing better than it deserves. Ah, if our little Zelda, our airy, fairy love-bird of equitation, were but with us still in her peerless bare-back wonder! But doubtless you have not yet got on the track of her?"

The detective shook his head.

"Bad, bad, bad!" and Mr. Isaacs tried to frown while touching glasses. "And, moreover, what can have become of my little secretary and press-agent, Gaston Larue? I want him badly, but he ran after you this morning, and that was the last of him."

"Listen, sir," said the detective; and he forthwith gave him a running account of what had chanced, after which he continued: "Now the discovery of Zelda's whereabouts may depend upon one person."

"What person?" demanded the show-master, who had listened eagerly.

"This newly-engaged Man-Fish, whose picture I saw Kalulah gazing at—the Japanese amphibian, you know."

"In what way?"

"By enlisting him, if possible, in our interest, to find out from Kalulah where she is now living, in case she should seek an interview with him this afternoon, as I predict that she will."

"To be sure! to be sure!"

"Who and what is the fellow? I want to find out if he is one that I can make a friend of and repose confidence in."

The show-master regarded him with a quizzical look.

"You know the Jap," said he.

"I know him?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"Spezzi."

Griplock burst into a laugh.

"What! Spezzi transformed afresh, and this time into a merman?"

"Exactly. What would you, my boy? Having lost our mermaid, some sort of substitute was indispensable, and I remembered Spezzi having vaunted some experience as a submarine wrecker. So I rung in Gypsy Frank as a clown, and persuaded the signor to pose in the tank act in Kalulah's place."

"I'd have supposed he would object to the change, as being somewhat *infra dig.*, you know."

"Do you forget that he is anxious to become my son-in-law?"

"Ah, to be sure. Poor Spezzi! But wait; I have it." He tapped his forehead. "Could anything chance more pat to my needs?"

"To what do you refer?"

"To the fact that Kalulah was once uncommonly sweet upon Spezzi, and doubtless remains so in secret to this day, for all that he has no eyes but for Kitty."

"Ah! now it is I that begin to comprehend."

"Where is the tank-act to be performed?"

"Northeast corner, between the elephants and the camels."

"Thanks! Will see you later. Ask Kitty to seek me out, if you see her before I do." And away went the detective in search of Signor Spezzi in his dressing-room.

CHAPTER XXXII.

KALULAH.

"AH, Meester Greeplock, it is no longer in a high career that you find me!" exclaimed the signor, dolefully. "To think how of late I have descended the ladder—from ring-master to merry Andrew, from that to a spurious Japanese man-fish—ever down, down and still down."

And he wiped a tear from his eye as he spoke, though too busy in his make-up for the moment to give the subject full justice.

"Oh, you must cheer up, signor," said Griplock, helping him with his costume. "It isn't every one that can be a pig-tailed merman on such surprisingly short notice, and besides you please Mr. Isaacs immensely undertaking the part."

"And Mees Kitty, too!" cried Spezzi, eagerly. "She have see me in my rehearsal, and declare me charming."

"That should be recompense enough, in all conscience," said Griplock, heartily. "What an experience to look back upon when Kitty Isaacs is the Signorina Spezzi and you are, perhaps, her father's partner in the combination!"

"Oh, but, Meester Griplock! ze dream is too bright—it dazzles me!"

"No need of that. In the meantime, I want you this day to help me out in finding where Leomeister has hidden Zelda away."

"With all my heart! What am I to do?"

"Make love with all your might to Kalulah, should the occasion offer."

"Corpo di Bacchio! Mees Kitty—"

"I will see that Miss Kitty shall not be offended. Listen to me, signor."

And the detective rapidly sketched the demands of the case.

"Now, look here," he continued. "You needn't make downright love to her, for that wouldn't be the fair thing, one way or another."

"No, Meester Griplock; because my heart, it is give to another."

"I understand. But you can be so agreeable to her that she will seek to make an appointment with you, and in that way lead to your getting her address, which is of course the same as where Leomeister and Gogo keep Zelda a prisoner, can't you?"

But such was the honest Italian's loyalty to the sole object of his worship that he could not yet fall in with the scheme.

All the detective could finally obtain was a conditional promise from Spezzi to enact the unenviable part laid out for him, provided that Miss Kitty should be present at the performance, and afford him some intimation that it was with her express permission.

Having gained this much, Griplock hurried away to find Kitty.

The latter had ceased to be before the public since the evanishment of her fellow trapeze per-

formers, and was found in the main property room, along with her mother.

She not only fell in with the detective's plan at once, but promised that Spezzi should receive both her permission and her command to enact his part therein forthwith.

"Come, we will go at once," said she. "The horse-acts are nearly over, and Spezzi should be ready for his tank by this time."

On their way around behind the spectators, she was very talkative and agreeable.

"I've seen the time when I wouldn't do as much as this for you or Zelda either," said she, with a pretty blush. "But that seems like a long time ago now. Poor Zelda! We must get her out of that villain's power at the earliest moment, and I only hope that Kalulah is still gone enough on my little signor to enable him to use her to that end. And then, to tell the truth," here she laughed, "I am highly curious to see how Spezzi will conduct himself as the Japanese merman."

"Your father informs me that he has had submarine experience," said the detective. "I was not aware of it before."

"Oh, yes; he can stay under water well enough and sufficiently long. But, ha, ha, ha! he is so comical, the poor dear fellow! with that rubber wig and pigtail attachment! It will make you die laughing, even if the public takes it in earnest."

They now came out between the elephants and the camels, into the roped inclosure where the small stage containing the merman's tank was on view.

A great crowd of spectators were already assembled, and among them the detective had the satisfaction of perceiving Kalulah.

She occupied a prominent place, and seemed conscious of hardly anything else but the new water-prodigy, who had just made his appearance from his dressing-room, and was being introduced in a neat little showman's harangue by Sheik Terence Grady Mahmoud, in lieu of a fitter man for the office.

A look of critical contempt sat upon the ex-mermaid's fair face as she regarded her imitator in the subaqueous sphere, and not without reason.

Spezzi, as a Japanese Merman, if not an unequivocal success, was at least a noticeable curiosity.

With the exception of green-and-gold trunks, his body was incased in a yellowish flesh-colored india-rubber suit, made to represent the natural skin, but gorgeously tattooed in a manner that would have excited the envy of a South Sea Islander, or challenged contrast with the craziest bed-quilt in a country fair.

His mustache was invisible, his eyes artificially oblique, his eyebrows enlarged, his mouth, with the assistance of red paint, extended in an immutable grin from ear to ear.

His large head of hair was concealed beneath a rubber membrane made to resemble the shaven poll of a disciple of Confucius, while the queue attached reached to his heels and was thicker than his wrist.

"Ye seez the Japanese Man-Fish, ladies and gentlemen," said the Arab expounder, glibly, "jist as he appeared before the crowned heads of Yurup and Aizhy when he dived to the bottom of the say for a diamond crown jewel tossed into the Persian Gulf by his Honor (bad 'cess to him for a Sassenach!) the Lord Mayor of London. He's infinitely more at home in the water than on dhry land. The little fishes are his companions, the sea-serpent his bosom friend, and whin he strikes his golden harp beneath the blue water, its more beautiful than the pipes of the piper that played before Moses. Ching-Lung, ladies and gentlemen, will now intrance ye wid his unheard-of spicialties under the deep blue wave."

Then the merman, with a dignified bow, stepped into the tank, and slowly sunk to the bottom in a sitting attitude.

There he quietly blinked, grinned, caressed his pigtail, and might be taken as saying his prayers or counting noses among the spectators, as one happened to be disposed.

Most of the spectators seemed to be highly entertained, while many laughed unrestrainedly.

Prominent among the latter was Kitty, whose silvery merriment seemed to reach the ears of the submerged merman himself.

At all events, he singled her out, and turned a watery look of reproach and pity toward her.

She seized the opportunity of nodding her head, and giving him several other signs to the effect that she sympathized with the designs of the man at her elbow, who was none other than the detective.

The fictitious amphibian seemed to understand, for he bent his head gravely, submissively, and then proceeded to go through with the various sub-aqueous stock-tricks in a slow and painstaking manner.

But Griplock had eyes for nothing but the changing expression in the ex-mermaid's face.

At last contempt gave place to surprise there, surprise to recognition, and, as a faint color began to come into her cheeks and her eyes to glow, he knew that she had recognized Spezzi in the Japanese wonder.

"She's catching on nicely," said the detective

to himself. "Let Spezzi only do the right thing now, and she's as good as hooped."

The occasion soon came.

The merman, glistening and self-possessed, was out of his tank, seated in an arm-chair at the side of the little stage, urbanely receiving the congratulations of the curious and admiring that were permitted to shake his hand and ask a few questions by turns from among the spectators.

The great man was holding his levee.

"Do just what Griplock asked you to," Kitty managed to whisper during this phase of the performance. "Remember; it is only by doing so that you can please me!"

Poor Spezzi brightened up.

The next one to pass was Kalulah, and she eyed the whisperer with a jealous look that caused Griplock to grow light-hearted.

It was now Kalulah's turn.

"I know you, Spezzi," she whispered. "Promise to see and talk with me directly after you have dressed, or I shall expose you as a fraud!"

His look of alarm changed to one of bold admiration, and he nodded emphatically as she passed.

"She nibbles!" was whispered to Kitty by the detective, upon whom nothing had been lost. "Don't you get jealous in turn now, and the game is in our hands."

"I jealous, and of Spezzi? It is so likely!"

Nevertheless, it was quite evident that when, ten minutes later, the signor, in his own proper costume, had wandered off among the spectators in Miss Kalulah's company, that it was just that that befell Kitty.

"What a forward minx the girl is!" said she. "It's no wonder that she never captured a real beau among the company, and that even Conrad always treated her with secret contempt. I wonder if she will really have the cheek to make an appointment with Maurice."

"Let us hope so, at least," said Griplock. "It is about my last chance of finding Zelda without openly seeking the aid of police. Gaston's disappearance, too, is quite inexplicable."

"Gaston! Has he disappeared, too?"

"Yes." And he related the incident.

"How very extraordinary!" said Kitty. "But there's no fear, I think, of Leomeister having killed him."

"Why not?"

"I can't explain, only I always felt instinctively that there was something mysterious about Gaston, with his silent and retiring but observant ways, that made Conrad secretly afraid of him. Milly and I used to remark upon it, even in poor Mr. Vanderpoer's day."

"Of what nationality is Gaston, think you?" asked the detective, after a pause.

"French, I think, but I am not certain, he speaks so many languages fluently. Mr. Vanderpoer picked him up in Antwerp or Algiers, I believe. What a ridiculous fool that Spezzi is! Where can he have gone with that bold Malay hussy?"

They were passing Othmar's cage at the time, and Griplock suddenly arrested their promenade.

"Try to not look startled," he whispered. "Leomeister is here, and not far away."

"Have you seen him?"

"No."

"How do you know, then?"

"Look at Othmar."

The lion had suddenly grown restless, and there was a searching, half-cowed expression in his yellow eyes.

"His old trainer is present," continued the detective. "He has encountered Conrad's quelling eye within a minute or two, or he would not act in that way. It is an unmistakable sign."

"Is it? But maybe it is your own eye that has caused it."

"But I had not once looked at him. Besides, Othmar is not so familiar with my glance as with Conrad's."

"I shall be on the lookout. Ah! here is Spezzi looking for me at last. And he looks well enough contented, too."

At this moment there was a cry of "Pick-pockets!" on the other side of the tent, and Griplock darted away.

He had just had time to note a light-fingered rascal being nabbed by a policeman when he felt a faint pressure upon his waistcoat in the crowd.

His own time-piece was safe enough, but, thrust into the same pocket was a slip of paper, with these words in pencil:

"Don't think me strayed, lost or stolen. I am only on the watch. Your present plan with Kalulah is a good one. GASTON."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MISSING ADDRESS.

THE detective was fairly mystified. Gaston himself had doubtless passed the communication to him in the crowd, but why not have given it by word of mouth, and wherefore the occasion for such apparently superfluous mystery?

However, that it was not wholly superfluous

was evident enough in the fact, or seeming fact, of its having come from Larue.

A moment later, he was rejoined by Kitty, who was now accompanied by Spezzi.

The former's eyes were sparkling with ill-humor, and the signor was correspondingly dolorous and miserable.

"Ah, Meester Griplock," said he, pleadingly, "I have you to thank for this. You see before you the most miserable of men!"

"What is the matter?" asked the detective, though perceiving the difficulty at a glance. "Didn't you succeed in obtaining the appointment with Kalulah?"

"Ah, that is it. I did succeed, and am therefore tortured! I appeal to you, Meester Griplock, if it was my fault—if it was an interview of my seeking—if I had not Mees Kitty's *carte blanche* to follow your instructions with ze detestable Malay young woman!"

"Oh, that is all right," said Griplock. "Miss Isaacs, he really had your permission, not to say command."

"To make an appointment with the minx—I grant that," said Kitty, slightly mollified by the adjective 'detestable' as applied to the absent fair one. "But not to seem downright gone on her, to the extent that it was a public spectacle!"

The detective burst out laughing.

"Oh, come, now, this is too ridiculous!" said he. "You are unjust to the signor, Kitty. Why, the poor devil looked as if he was swallowing an emetic all the time when with the girl. It was noticeable. I trembled for the success of my scheme."

Kitty's face cleared, and her lover consequently began to beam.

"Well, I consent to forgive him this time," said she, magnanimously. "But only on condition that I shall be present at the secret appointment he has made with her."

"Where would the secrecy come in, then?" said Griplock, laughing again. "But I rejoice that an appointment was effected. Would she not give you the address outright, signor?"

"Alas, no, my friend! She was mysterious, she was afraid. I have to pretend to make love, to grow tender, to be softly persistent, though it give me ze sea-sickness."

"I should think so," said Kitty.

"What was the upshot?" asked Griplock, a little abruptly, for he was growing impatient.

After much more circumlocution, it came out that Spezzi was to have a street appointment with Kalulah that night, after show-hours, when she was to give him her address, that he might correspond with her when personal meetings should be impracticable.

The place of meeting was on the ridge over the roadway tunnel at the East River foot of Forty-second street, the same being the continuation of the quiet residence street, overlooking the water, that is known as Prospect place.

It is needless to say that Miss Kitty was finally induced to reconsider her intention of being present at the secret meeting aforesaid.

But Griplock was duly on hand in the garb of a rough seafaring man, who was leaning over the terrace rail, apparently absorbed in a half-inebriated observation of the adjacent river, when Kalulah and her romantic appointee stepped out from the neighboring shadows at a close approximation to the witching midnight hour.

It is a rather favorite resort for lovers of the humbler sort, especially on Saturday nights, this lofty roadway crossing the Forty-second street tunnel.

It is well withdrawn from the busy streets below, and at the same time affords a fine view of the shipping and river over the streets and even the housetops on the outer side, while in the opposite direction, looking over the brow of the main street, as it rises from under the archway, one can get glimpses of two Elevated Railroad stations.

But for some reason, on the Saturday night under consideration, the terrace was altogether deserted, save for the presence of the meditative sailor alluded to, as Kalulah and the apparently enamored Signor Spezzi stepped into view, with a like inclination for the outer rail.

"Some one is here—we are not alone," said Kalulah. "I wish that rough man would go away!"

"Shall I order him away, my dear, or chuck him over?" said the gentleman, complacently, though perfectly aware that it was Griplock and none else.

"How brave you are, Maurice!" said Kalulah admiringly. "But no; I wouldn't have you break the poor man's neck, for that would attract the attention of the police, which is not desirable. But you might speak to the man, and perhaps he would go away."

Spezzi accordingly addressed the apparent sailor with some brusqueness in more languages than one before eliciting a response.

Then the fellow looked up unsteadily, replied in some sort of jargon, and merely altered his lounging attitude at the rail.

"He's an Arab, and can understand nothing but Arabic," said Spezzi returning to his fair charge. "Still, I'll fire him over into the abyss, if you only say so."

"Oh, by no means! I hardly think we shall need to talk in Arabic, Maurice."

Signor Mauritius Spezzi placed his hand on his heart, and assumed an ecstatic expression, without answering.

She linked her hands over his arm and looked up imploringly into his face.

"Tell me something, Maurice," she murmured.

"What you will, my dear."

"Why, if you really care for me now—that is, if I have suddenly become distasteful to you—"

"Distasteful? Santo Marco! what a word in such a connection."

"Why, then, did you use to be so cold to me when we traveled with the show together? Tell me that."

Spezzi was somewhat embarrassed for a plausible reply.

Apart from this, his position was not without danger to his susceptibilities.

Kalulah, notwithstanding her greenish-black eyes, which alone betrayed her Malay or Sumatran origin, was an undeniably attractive young woman, and, moreover, apart from her infatuation for the signor, which had been an old joke among the tent men, she was lacking in neither common sense nor womanly penetration.

"Can you not guess, *cara mia*?" Spezzi at last managed to answer. "The deuce! I have not a thousand lives, and where was there a man in the show who was not fearful of the ill-will of Leomeister?"

"Conrad! what was he to me?"

"You know best, *cara mia*."

Kalulah slightly flushed.

"He was and is my—master; my brother Gogo's master and mine," said she. "Whoever has thought else has thought a lie!"

"I take your word for it, my dear."

"Of course you do; I should say so. When Conrad came across us in Java, where we were exhibiting our specialties to the foreigners, I was a mere child. He took us up, educated us in English, and has been a fast friend to us ever since. That is all."

"Ah, I believe you. But you swear you have never loved him?"

"Him? I do swear it, Maurice!" this with much earnestness. "Why, Leomeister might be my father—he is old enough; and, moreover, he is insanely infatuated with Zelda."

"Ah! the little Zelda. She is still with you all, I suppose?"

"Of course, and will remain with us till she perishes or becomes Conrad's wife, one of the two, depend upon that."

Not a word of these interchanges was lost by the disguised detective, who at this moment, however, saw what escaped the attention of the signor and his companion.

It was the shadowy presence of three men—two that momentarily betrayed themselves at the entrance of the narrow little side-street (Prospect place itself) before again fading into the obscurity; and yet another, further back, who appeared to be secretly watching those two as intently as they in their turn were watching the lover-like couple at the terrace-rail.

"A counterplot is under way," thought the detective. "But if those two lurkers are Conrad and Gogo, as I suspect, who can their shadower be? Not Zelda herself in masculine disguise? That would be too good for reality. But let us watch and wait."

"By the way, *cara mia*," Spezzi went on to say, "you must not forget to give me your present address, as you promised."

"I shall not forget, my dear Maurice. What, are you so anxious to have it, then?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"There it is, then."

She laughed coquettishly, and handed him a slip of paper.

At that instant, the two men in the shadows precipitated themselves upon the pair with the fury of wild beasts.

"Traitor or fool!" snarled the lion-tamer's voice, "would you betray us to that idiot? The address, Spezzi! Return it, or—"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FIGHT ON THE TERRACE.

The sentence was never completed.

For, though Spezzi was already in the combined grasp of both Conrad and Gogo, while Kalulah had become petrified with fear, at that instant the pretended sailor flew at the lion-tamer's throat, who suddenly realized that he was in the remorseless grip of the only man on earth he feared—Griplock Crimmins, the Circus Detective.

It was the clutch of steel, the vise-grip, so similar to that of which it has been so aptly rhymed:

"Stick to your aim! the mongrel's hold may slip,
But only crows loose the bulldog's grip—
That strength which, while the innocent it shields,
Drags down the bellowing monarch of the fields!"

Then, Spezzi being also a muscular and fearless man, there seemed a good chance of the tables being turned.

Indeed, both assailants were being hard pressed against the railing, and, though the fight was at too close quarters for the use of any but nature's weapons, there seemed a great likeli-

hood of their being speedily tossed over into the deep cut, which could mean little less than a pair of broken necks.

But accident favored the scoundrels, as had been the case on many a previous occasion.

A group of policemen, looking up from below, mistook Griplock and Spezzi for the original aggressors, and rushed pell-mell up the communicating stone steps, to take a hand in the disturbance.

"Help! help!" roared Leomeister, in simulated terror. "The lady's in peril! The miscreants are tearing her from our protection!"

Before the misrepresentation could be rectified, the guardians of the night sailed in with their clubs, right and left.

By an unfortunate coincidence, the mistake was assisted, rather than prevented, for the time being.

In addition to his naturally swarthy and romantic aspect, Spezzi had provided himself for the tender interview with an enormous steeple-crowned sombrero, that gave him a decidedly brigandish appearance, while the rough sailor garb of the detective went far to second the suspicious impression thus created.

If not well-known, the formidableness of the New York policeman's night-stick can well be imagined, especially when wielded by a sturdy Celtic arm, with the belief that its blows are falling upon a midnight prowler or some blood-thirsty desperado.

As Griplock and Spezzi reeled back, protecting themselves as best they might from this fresh attack, and vociferating their protests, Leomeister snatched up Kalulah as if she were no more than a wax doll, and darted away with Gogo, disappearing amid the shadows of the little side street.

A slight scuffle seemed to ensue there, and then they were gone.

The conflict was at an end.

The roundsman in command of the officers stood scratching his head half-apologetically, while his subordinates were looking both excited and foolish.

The Circus Detective had displayed his professional badge, while the mingled explanations and anathemas of poor Spezzi, whose picturesque hat had alone saved him from a dozen or more fractures of the skull, were at last being received with some degree of politeness.

"Be the powers!" said the roundsman; "how war we to know yez for circus men and the others for the divils yez say they was? Couldn't yez hev yelled a little louder forinst the foight? So it's thim divils what's kerryin' off the young leddy? Afther thim, ye shpalpeens! We'll arrist them yet."

He waved his club, and they all scattered, running off in different directions, ostensibly for the purpose of securing the fugitives, but really to avoid, if possible, the consequences of what might prove a costly mistake.

Fortunately, neither Griplock nor his companion had suffered any serious injury throughout the affair.

"It might have been even worse," was the detective's cheerful comment, when the coast was again clear. "Of course, you've got the address, for I saw her give it to you."

"Alas, no!" and Signor Spezzi fumbled disconsolately in his pocket. "Gone, my friend, gone!"

"Gone! Oh, come now; that can't be possible. Look again. I saw you put it in your pocket at the last moment."

"Right, my friend; but you will remember that that last moment was a decidedly critical one for me. *Corpo di Bacchio!* both had me by the neck at once, and, just as you rushed so bravely to my aid, I felt a wrenching hand in the very pocket in which I had so triumphantly thrust the precious paper an instant before."

The detective gave a despairing exclamation, which was interrupted by a slight, graceful figure suddenly stepping into view from the little side-street along which the brace of scoundrels had effected their retreat with Kalulah.

"Here is the address," said the new-comer, extending something in his hand. "Fighting isn't in my line—I wouldn't have been much account in rushing to your rescue; but, nevertheless, I robbed Leomeister of this in his turn in the brief scuffle that you must have heard in among the shadows yonder."

Griplock uttered a gratified cry, and clasped the speaker in his arms.

It was Gaston Larue.

"There's no need of being so exuberant," said the latter, releasing himself with good-natured brusqueness, one might almost have said, with a blush. "There is your paper. The best part of it is that I hardly think Leomeister can know of having lost it. I merely pretended to be a chance wayfarer in his way, and effected the theft with considerable cleverness, if I say it myself."

Griplock gave him another grateful look, and then read the address.

"Why," said he, "it's that huge red brick factory only a block above the building we were deceived into entering!"

"That is true."

"Now tell me where you have been."

"With Zelda."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Never was more so."

"Hurry up, and explain. In the first place, did you see me tumbled down the hoisting-way?"

"Yes; and was powerless to prevent it, or even cry out."

"Now for your story."

"It shall be short, though a most remarkable story it is. You saw me suddenly disappear when preceding you at the top of the stair?"

"Yes."

"Gogo had throttled me and dragged me into a cranny with the swiftness of thought. Before that I had seen Conrad grasping the end of the carpet-strip, in readiness to trip you the instant your feet touched it. I was gagged and bound so quickly that Gogo had time, short as was the interval, to spring out of the cubby-hole into which he had dragged me, and assist in hurling you down the shaft. I knew of your miraculous escape from their exclamations of baffled rage. Then they made their escape from the building."

"Leaving you behind! Oh, had I but thought of that!"

"Your return to the top floor would hardly have resulted in your finding me, I had been stowed away so cunningly."

"Well, what next?"

"They returned in half-an-hour, and carried me away—taking out my gag, and walking me through the street between them, with my hat pulled down over my eyes, as if I were a drunken friend whom they were caring for, but at the same time threatening me with instant death if I made the least outcry. I pretended to be horribly frightened, but was, of course, glad enough to go, if I should but obtain the secret of their abiding-place."

"We got there at last. It is even a taller building than the one we entered, and stands directly on the water. I think it must have been a sugar-refinery, though now used for other manufacturing purposes, with the exception of the top floor, which is on the tenth story."

"When we got up there, Leomeister said to me: 'Of course, you understand that I haven't spared your life through pity for you. I want you to be a companion for Zelda, who, I fear, without some sort of diversion, will mope and grieve herself to death. She is in a bad way now, and as for Kalulah,' he added, with an oath, 'she's turned out a rebellious hussy who may yet feel our anger.' Then Gogo hissed and darted out his tongue. 'Yes,' said he, 'Kalulah is no longer any good, and thinks only for her selfish pleasure. She must mend her ways, or I shall strangle her without mercy, though she were twenty-times my sister.'

"They then took me through a long and handsome corridor into a locked suite of rooms, where I found Zelda."

"I have been with her until an hour or so ago."

"One thing more," demanded Griplock.

"What is it?" said Gaston.

"Then you were not secretly at this afternoon's performance of our show?"

"Of course not. Why do you ask, after what I have explained?"

"Oh, it matters not now. I merely had a note, purporting to come from you, pinned to my clothing while in the crowd there. I now see that it was but another trick of Leomeister, doubtless intended to hoodwink me as to your whereabouts; though it was a stupid and aimless trick, at the best."

CHAPTER XXXV.

LEOMEISTER'S REVENGE.

GASTON added many particulars to his remarkable story.

Both Conrad and Gogo had flown into a furious rage on finding that Kalulah, who had been left with Zelda, had taken herself off during their absence, leaving word that she was going to the circus.

After that she had not returned.

Before leaving Gaston and Zelda alone together, Conrad had indulged in the direst threats of vengeance in the event of an attempt to escape, saying that he had fixed upon a plan for burning them alive in the building, should his safety or resentment demand it.

After being left alone in the prison apartments, Zelda had exhibited the silver casket, which she had had in her possession, unknown to Leomeister, who was constantly brooding over its loss, from the hour of her being carried off from the hut in the Dismal Valley.

Toward night she had also apprised her companion of an insecurity in one of the locked doors, by which he soon became convinced that, with perseverance, he could force it open.

That evening they overheard Leomeister and Gogo in conversation. The two had become aware of Kalulah's appointment with Spezzi by some means, and were resolved not only to interrupt it, but to wreak summary vengeance on Kalulah and all concerned.

After discussing the details of what they would do, they had again taken themselves off, after leaving food for their prisoners.

Then Gaston had lost no time in getting to work at the insecure door, succeeding after a long period in forcing it open. But here, in

springing from a chair, which she had been standing upon, in order to assist him, Zelda had been so unfortunate as to sprain her ankle so painfully as to render her accompanying the fugitive, according to the first intention an impossibility.

Gaston then proposed that she permit him to carry the casket to the detective, but she would not hear of this, beseeching him rather to follow in the track of the enemy, whose intentions were so manifest, defeat their plans, and bring the detective to her succor.

This plan Gaston had carried out, with the result, thus far, that we have seen.

The news of Zelda having the casket in her possession completed the detective's rejoicing.

"Come," said he, "we shall effect Zelda's rescue at once, and bring confusion upon these scoundrels at the same time. Will you join us, Signor Spezzi?"

The signor, who was naturally of an adventurous disposition, consented with the utmost willingness.

Arriving at the lofty building in question, Gaston, who had the secret of the stairway door, effected an admittance for the trio.

Griplock had provided himself with a small dark-lantern along with his sailor disguise.

This enabled them to make their way up the stairways noiselessly and with ease, though the distance to be ascended more than once caused them to pause for breath.

Arriving at the living apartments on the top landing, a great surprise was in store for them.

The door was open, the gas burning, and the interior gave evidence of having been hurriedly deserted.

The handsome furniture of the first rooms was in confusion, dusty tracks were over the carpets, and here and there were odds and ends of masculine wardrobes, as though a general packing up and cleaning out had been recently executed in a sort of panic.

The detective ground his teeth.

"Gone!" he exclaimed. "They've taken the alarm and fled, doubtless taking Zelda away with them."

"It must be true," said Spezzi. "Ah, the foxes, the wolves."

"Let us not be sure of that yet," said Gaston. "Disheartened and desperate as I know them to have been, they could not have carried Zelda away with them so lightly, and I know she could not have walked far of her own volition by reason of her sprain. Come."

He sprang through the lighted rooms to a door that stood half ajar.

"Where would you lead us?" cried the detective.

He threw open the door, disclosing the long corridor of which she had told them.

"To the prison-apartments," he answered. "We shall soon know if Zelda has been left there or taken away."

Closely followed by the two men, he sprang along the lighted corridor.

Suddenly the floor opened beneath them, and they were precipitated, one on top of the other, into a deep compartment below.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Leomeister's demoniac voice from overhead. "You want your Zelda so badly, Griplock? Well, then take her from my hands, with death—death for you both, death for all of you, as my final contribution. But look around you first, and see how you relish the situation."

Partly stunned by their fall, but fortunately with no broken bones, the three men sprang to their feet and took in their surroundings.

They were in a small, deep room, that seemed roughly but strongly partitioned off from one of the lower floors. The place had an oily, disagreeable smell, and the corners were heaped with piles of greasy rags, crumpled papers, and bunches of tow, blackened and musty, as though having once been used in cleaning machinery, while oil and paint cans were scattered about.

In one corner sat Zelda, pale with physical suffering, and unable to move by reason of her injured ankle, but who, nevertheless, gave a joyous cry on seeing the three men spring unhurt to their feet, for the room was fairly lighted by a couple of lanterns dangling from the wall, and she recognized Griplock instantly, in spite of his disguise.

In another corner lay Kalulah, gagged, bound, and with indications of having undergone a terrific beating.

Looking down upon them through the treacherous trap-door, were the faces of Leomeister and Gogo, the former grinning like a fiend, the latter giving snake-like hisses, and darting his hideous red tongue in and out in his merriest of diabolical moods.

It was evident at a glance that they had been fortifying themselves for a final desperate venture by excessive and unusual potations, with the result of both maddening them to the highest pitch, and causing their customary prudence to be thrown to the winds.

"Do you know where you are, my beauties?" yelled the lion-tamer, with a repetition of his blood-curdling laugh. "You are in the waste-room of the great factory that does business in this mighty building. Everything surrounding you is alarmingly combustible. In five minutes

the whole crowd of you will be in the midst of a sea of fire, while Gogo and I will alone make our escape from the accursed building. Take back your Zelda, Griplock! Since the casket is lost, and she has no longer a French fortune at her back, I have no further use for her, though, had she been less coy, I might have loved her for her beauty alone. But this I will tell you, as a last satisfaction, ere the fire takes you into its red embrace. She is the Villemessant heiress, though you little dreamed of it as aught but a ruse when you exploited that chance advertisement in the Gypsy camp. Ha, ha, ha! You, too, Spezzi, farewell! If you really love the fair Kalulah, take her in your embrace. She is yours and the fire's, but no longer for us, who have no need of traitors more. Gaston, I had no desire to have your life, but you have fatally intermeddled here, and you must even suffer with the rest. Farewell!"

He dashed a glass kerosene lamp down into one of the waste corners, where it at once exploded, causing an instant conflagration.

Then, with a loud bang, the trap-door was closed, there was a parting demoniac shout, the flames seemed to leap from spot to spot with terrible rapidity, and the devoted prisoners were left to their fate.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FIRE-TRAP.

BUT inevitable death itself, in the shape of devouring fire, was destined to recoil for at least a space before the indomitable bravery and determination of a man like Griplock Crimmins, the Circus Detective.

A catastrophe precipitated so swiftly, so unexpectedly, might well have appalled the stoutest heart that ever beat the muffled death-roll in a human breast, but for a few moments the detective seemed equal to even such an occasion.

Seizing an old broom that chanced to be among the refuse of the place, and calling upon his fellow-victims in inspiring tones, he quickly heaped the blazing material into the corner where the fire had started, and, tearing off his coat, threw that too upon the flames, trampling it down hard as he did so.

Spezzi and Larue imitated his example in this last respect, and, though both heat and smoke were already nearly stifling, a momentary relief was obtained.

After the first shock, Zelda had rallied her courage, and perfectly helpless as she was, had remained heroically resigned to the certain death that seemed staring them all in the face.

But Kalulah, who had been relieved of her gag and thongs while Leomeister was yelling his horrible harangue down the trap, had set up the most blood-curdling yells.

She now continued them, interspersing the cries with prayers for mercy and incoherent confessions as to her participation in past crimes that were awful to hear.

"Save me! Save me! I am not fit to die!" she raved. "Save me and I will make a clean breast of all. Gogo's was the hand, at Conrad's instance, that stabbed Mr. Vanderpoer to the heart! I knew of it, yet lifted not my voice to warn, to save. The deadly knife with which the deed was done had been stolen from Centerpole Jack the week before."

"Gogo first visited Conrad in prison, crawling through the window bars. I was awaiting him outside the victim's window. Before he crept in, he made me give him my handkerchief to twine the knife-hilt with, that his grasp might not slip in dealing the fatal blow. But otherwise I am innocent. I swear it, God! But there are other crimes. Save me, save me, and I will confess them all! Oh, let me not die thus! Save me, save me, and I will help the world to hang those infamous men!"

The effect of such appalling revelations, though only half-intelligible, shrieked out at such a time, can be better imagined than described.

In the midst of their own peril, her companions in the death-trap regarded her with horror and loathing.

But there was, naturally enough, scant time for anything but the awful reality of their position.

The hungry flames, though deadened for a few seconds, spread like wild-fire among the combustibles.

While Larue and Spezzi continued their efforts to stamp them underfoot, Griplock's next move was to spring to the door and examine it.

It was stout, and apparently bolted on the outside.

He made but one pause—to snatch Zelda to his breast, and press a last kiss to her trembling lips—and then hurled himself against the barrier.

His body bounded back, the door remaining immovable.

Suddenly, however, hurried steps were heard on the other side, amid the crackling of the flames and the ravings of the conscience-tortured girl.

"Help!" shouted the detective at the top of his powerful lungs.

"Coming, coming!" responded a voice that was strange to them all.

The bolts were heard to shoot back, the door flew open.

They were saved.

The rescuer proved to be the night-watchman of the factory, who had chanced to be visiting that floor by the strangest of accidents.

The burning room was emptied of its human contents in an instant, but a last glance into the interior was sufficient.

"Nothing can save this room," cried the newcomer, closing the door again. "There's a chance of its burning itself out in there, but it's only a chance."

As they all hurried to the stairways, Zelda being carried by the detective, the latter briefly explained to the watchman the situation from which he had so opportunely rescued them.

They had hardly crossed the great floor, and opened the door leading upon the stair landing, before the flames, with a whoop and a roar, burst through the partition of the waste-room.

Everything became as light as day, and the fire leaped along the walls and ceilings with uncontrollable energy.

"Quick! out and down!" cried the watchman.

"The building must go!"

A furious exclamation interrupted him.

It was from Leomeister.

He was on his way down from above, doubtless making sure of effecting his escape, when the sight of his victims, flushed but unscorched, issuing upon the landing, had caused him to recoil a step or two in astonishment and rage.

Before he could recover, Griplock Crimmins had resigned Zelda to Spezzi's charge and sprung at his throat.

The strong men clinched, and then went rolling headlong, locked in each others clutch, down the steps to the next lower landing.

Here the fight for the mastery was continued along the short passage, when there was a second plunging descent similar to the first.

So it continued all the way down to the street passage, the others following as best they might, and the untrammelled flames roaring behind and above them like an army of devouring fiends.

Under ordinary circumstances, the detective's wrestling skill would have mastered his man in short order.

But Leomeister, an immensely muscular man, was now fighting for both life and liberty, and he was, moreover, inspired by a species of frenzy that seemed to invest him with strength and activity little short of superhuman.

Both men were covered with dust, and had had more than half their clothing torn away, by the time the lower landing was reached in this extraordinary way.

It was a top-and-bottom, rough-and-tumble contest such as would have gratified the longings of all fighting New York in the days of the volunteer fire department.

If Griplock was like a hero, in his steadfast coolness, pluck and indomitableness, his antagonist was none the less like a royal tiger in the hunter's toils.

It was only when the sidewalk was reached that the detective began to assert the mastery.

A great crowd had already gathered, for the entire upper story in which the waste room was situated was now belching forth smoke and tongues of flames, and there were numbers, led by Spezzi and Larue, who would have rushed to his assistance, but he sternly called to them to hold their hands.

In grappling with man or fiend, it was not the custom of Griplock Crimmins to rely upon aught else than his single prowess.

At last, however, the victory was complete.

Conquered, the lion-tamer was in the hands of the police, handcuffed and helpless.

But his frenzy remained.

"We shall yet meet again!" he snarled, gnashing his teeth and glaring at his conqueror with bloodshot eyes.

The detective was quietly dusting off what garments remained to him, with Gaston's assistance.

"Whenever you can manage it," was his quiet reply, "though I rather think you will have to tussle with some prison discipline as a preliminary to any fresh meeting."

The watchman had in the meantime furnished the policemen with such explanations as they required, and Leomeister was led away.

While Zelda and Kalulah were being conducted to a place of temporary security by the light of the blazing building, a massive but kindly hand was laid on the detective's shoulder.

Griplock looked up to recognize Black Jago. "You here?" he exclaimed, grasping the fellow's hand, and leading him along.

"Yes."

"But why have you come?"

They had by this time reached the shelter of an hospitable shop which had been thrown open for the rescued party's accommodation on an adjacent corner.

The detective studied the Gypsy's face with intense anxiety.

"Nesta is not dead?" said he, with a tremor in his voice. "Do not tell me that, my friend."

"I sha'n't, because it wouldn't be true," said Jago, cheerily. "Nesta, on the contrary, is doing as well as can be expected."

"Thank God for that!" and the detective drew a great breath of relief, which caused no jealous pang to Zelda, who was close at hand.

"She is with her brother," continued the Gypsy, "and the doctor thinks she will finally recover."

"Why are you here?" repeated the detective. Jago blushed through his swarthy skin, and looked embarrassed.

"Miss Isaacs was restless," he stammered. "She wanted to see her father and mother and sister very much."

Griplock smiled. "They will be equally eager to see her," said he. "And perhaps your own welcome among them, my good fellow, will be better than you anticipate."

Jago's face brightened. "I say," said he, after another embarrassed pause, "I saw it all."

"Saw what?" "You see," the Gypsy went on to explain, "we didn't get to the city till late, and, after I had left Miss Isaacs at a hotel, I strolled around to see the sights. I was drawn here by the crowd, and that is how I happened to see it all."

"But what do you refer to?" "Your muss with Conrad."

"Oh! but the worst of that was the tumble down nine flights of stairs. You only saw the wind-up."

"That was enough." Griplock laughed.

"Well," said he, "what did you think of it, so far as you saw?"

Black Jago lifted both hands up in a grand gesture.

"Perez," said he, solemnly, "Zingarino Perez, language can't express what I thought of that match! My tussle with you couldn't hold a candle to it; it even laid over your rumpus with Purring Pedro!"

"What hotel did you take Mildred to?" asked Zelda.

Jago mentioned the name of a hotel, which chanced to be but a short distance from the one at which Mr. and Mrs. Isaacs were staying.

"And has Milly recovered from her injuries?"

"No, ma'm, but she is much better," said Jago. "But if our Nesta was only in tenth part as far recovered as is Miss Isaacs our whole tribe would now be full of joy."

There was something in his tone that renewed both Zelda's and Griplock's apprehensions on account of the Gypsy princess.

But before they could ask any more questions Spezzi and Larue, who had gone to seek for some public conveyance, came bustling in from the excited street.

"There's a terrible spectacle!" exclaimed the signor. "A man has been left alive in the top story of the burning building, and—"

He stopped, recollecting himself, as his glance fell on Kalulah.

The latter, after recovering from her insane panic, had grown stolid and calm.

Perhaps some recollection of the appalling confessions she had made in the course of her ravings, together with a dread of their consequences to herself, contributed not a little to her present hopeless and stoical state.

But she looked up quickly at the Italian's words and glance.

An intuitive knowledge of what was coming seemed to possess her; she turned pale under the bruises of her face, but did not tremble.

"Don't mind me, Maurice," said she, quietly. "Speak right out. It is my brother who now finds himself cut off by the flames?"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A TRAGIC SCENE.

A TERRIBLE cry from the crowd in the street was a sufficient answer to Kalulah's question, even had not Signor Spezzi bent his head in response to it.

Every one instinctively sought a view of the blazing building.

It was, indeed, Gogo who was flame-girt on the top of the edifice.

His awful situation explained itself.

Doubtless, while following Leomeister down the first flight, the sudden attack upon the latter had caused him to retrace his steps; only to find shortly afterward his escape hopelessly cut off.

He was on the roof, running from point to point along the edge, where the upswirling smoke and flames would permit.

The snake-resemblance was more startlingly apparent than ever before.

The flat, smooth brow was thrust far forward by the sinuous, craning neck; even while running about erect, there was a writhing, twining motion in the long, lithe, elastic frame; as he wrung his hands in his despair, his fingers, wrists and arms seemed to twist and untwist over one another like individual serpents subjected to the fire test; so vivid was the glare encircling him that even at that distance his garnet-red, fang-like tongue could be seen to play in and out excitedly between the thin, tight-drawn lips; and, though no outcry escaped him, it was easy to imagine, even by the mass of

spectators, who could have no knowledge of his characteristics as a *lusus naturæ*, that he was furiously spitting and hissing out his rage up there in the bosom of the devouring element.

A shudder ran through the assembled multitude, which could but helplessly await the inevitable end of the tragedy; while the horrified knot of more familiar spectators at the shop-door could only catch their breaths and gaze as if fascinated by the appalling spectacle.

Several firemen, whose loftiest ladders would not have reached midway to the floor in which the fire had originated, presently set up a combined shout, and strove to direct the victim's attention to a certain object.

This was a strong beam, or arm of timber, reaching out from the cornice at one side, from which a block and tackle, used as an outside hoist-way, dangled its ropes, with a grappling hook at the upper end, part way down through the belching smoke and flames on that side, which was at that moment, however, more intact than any other point.

Then a shout of sympathy went up from a thousand throats.

There was a ghostly chance that, the connecting cordage once firmly clutched, the victim might succeed in sliding down, with a slight scorching, to within reach of one of the lower windows, through which the engines were by this time flooding the lower floors.

Gogo was at last seen to understand the meaning of the shouts and signs, and to bound along the edge of the projecting beam.

It was already smoking, but not yet on the fire, and the tackle stood out far enough to be still secure—though perhaps too far out to be attained by a flying leap.

But it was the Man-Snake's sole remaining chance, and, after retreating for a short run, he took the leap.

It was successful.

There was another united cry, this time almost a huzza, which, however, quickly changed to a groan.

Oh, horror!

The victim had succeeded in clutching the ropes with one hand, but the other had become impaled on one of the sharp hooks of the grapple.

He struggled and writhed, but it was painfully evident that he was held fast at that dizzy height, with the flame-tongues from the nearest window already greedily licking his body, without a hope of release.

Then at last the most appalling screams and shrieks burst from the unhappy victim.

Monstrosity in moral as in physical structure, and perhaps fully deserving such a fate, it was one for which there could be nothing but horror and commiseration now.

There came an explosive sound, the flames burst from every window on a line with the writhing form, and the screams grew feebler and feebler.

Hundreds of eyes were turned away, and there was a general shudder, as Gogo, the Man-Snake, was slowly roasted to death in mid-air.

"Ah! he beat me cruelly, but—he was my brother!"

The wailing exclamation was from among the horrified group at the little shop door.

It was the only utterance that had been evoked by the tragic spectacle, and Kalulah, the utterer, sunk to the ground in a swoon.

"Make room for her in the carriage," said Zelda to Spezzi, who had at last succeeded in having a couple of coaches driven up to the spot. "She must be cared for first."

Griplock, upon whose arm she was leaning, cast a look of repulsion upon the unconscious Kalulah and then turned a glance of wonder at the pale, lovely face so full of divine pity.

"Cared for? Yes, I suppose so; but surely not by you!" said he.

She merely bowed her head resolutely, and was obeyed.

In half-an-hour the entire party were gathered at the hotel where Mr. and Mrs. Isaacs were staying.

After Zelda's sprained ankle had received the attention of a physician, and she was feeling much easier, she begged Mrs. Isaacs and Kitty to let her see the detective alone, if he had not gone to bed.

She was lying on a lounge in a charming little parlor, with two bed-rooms attached, which had been provided for her.

In one of the chambers Kalulah was lying at the point of death, but for the time being under the influence of opiates.

"Mr. Crimmins is in consultation with my husband, dear," said Mrs. Isaacs, gently. "But hadn't you better go to bed and have a good rest before seeing him?"

Zelda had, with Kitty's assistance, changed her clothes, and was looking very pale, but still charming, in a pretty *negligee* costume that had been lent her for the occasion, and her bandaged foot was resting easily upon a soft cushion.

She shook her head.

"No, Mamma Isaacs," said she, "I must see Griplock at once. Do humor me in this."

"Of course she shall," said Kitty, kissing her. "Maurice can't have gone to bed yet, either, and

he shall find your darling Griplock for you without a moment's delay."

Then Mrs. Isaacs also kissed her, and a few minutes later the reunited lovers were once more alone together.

"I have got something for you," said Zelda, with a happy smile, as the detective, taking her hand, seated himself contentedly at her side.

"I can guess what it is, my darling," said he. "Though the treasure is not for me."

"Ah, you mistake there. Whatever is mine is henceforth yours."

She drew from her bosom the long sought and hard fought-for silver casket, and placed it in his hands.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CASKET'S SECRET.

FOR an instant the detective could scarcely realize that the precious receptacle was at last restored to its rightful possessor, with no danger of its again vanishing beyond reach.

"Were Leomeister's words true with regard to your being the Villemessant heiress?" said he at last.

"Strictly true, for I have examined the papers," said Zelda. "Conrad must have known it at the time you made the claim for me, by the purest accident, in the Gypsy camp."

"Undoubtedly. That explains the sort of amazement and panic which was mixed up with his fury, and so mystified me at the time."

"Because the claim was a mere pretense on your part?"

"Of course. The coming of that French advertisement in my way must be considered more providential than accidental. How else to explain such a seemingly miraculous coincidence?" "God's hand was in it!" said Zelda, fervently.

"At all events," said Griplock, "it is perhaps the only case known of a mere pretense turning into solid reality in order to right a wrong and bring confusion on the wrongers."

"But in reading the advertisement first, did no suspicion of the truth strike you?"

"Not for an instant."

"That is strange."

"Why?"

"You had read the monogram on the casket once before?"

"Yes; on the night poor Mr. Vanderpoer had shown it to me lying in his trunk—a few hours before his death at Gogo's assassin-hands."

"Decipher it yet again now, P. C. V.—what are the initials for but for the name of the Marquis in the advertisement, Pierre-Charles de Villemessant?"

"Astonishing! I see it now, but the initials, as originally deciphered in my hasty glance—you must remember that I did not have the casket actually in my hands—had failed to keep a lodgment in my memory. That explains my obtuseness. However, there is still something hazy."

"About what?"

"The initials."

"How so?"

"They only correspond to the name of your uncle, the marquis, while your father, his younger brother—"

"Had received the casket from the marquis, as a family souvenir, in the days of—of his repute. All is explained in the papers, written in Cayenne by my father himself, and duly attested."

"Then it was with Cayenne that your vague earliest memories were associated?"

"It appears so. My father died there, as is shown by another paper contained in the casket, and I was adopted by Planchez and his wife. They carried me to Algiers, where I remained till I was given over by the unhappy woman to Mr. Vanderpoer, as he once related to you."

"It is a truth far stranger than any fiction," said the detective, thoughtfully. "But I wish there might be some living witness to these strange facts. Otherwise, I fear we shall have difficulty in establishing your identity, to the satisfaction of the French courts."

"I feel that I shall pass through the ordeal triumphantly," said Zelda, firmly. "I am Genevieve de Villemessant, heiress to the Villemessant name, honors and estates. I feel that it is so, and that it shall be proven."

"The man, Planchez, died, I believe?"

"Yes; and from what Mr. Vanderpoer told you, the woman, my foster-mother, mysteriously disappeared soon after giving me into his care. Ah! if she were but alive, and could be found."

"It would be plain sailing then," said Griplock. "We shall have to seek for her; that is all. You remember her agreeably, I suppose?"

"More than that—tenderly! She loved me dearly. She may be said to have given me up only through compulsion."

"But would you know her again should you meet her?"

"Without doubt."

The detective then proceeded to examine the papers in the casket.

As near as he could judge, they were suffi-

cient documentary proof of the facts, as stated by Zelda.

She was, to all appearance, identical with the Genevieve de Villemessant inquired for by the advertisement, and but a single living witness would seem wanting to make that evident in a court of law.

The Providence, or Good Fortune, that had mysteriously befriended the young girl at last was not to desert her at the critical moment.

The witness was forthcoming.

On the following day, when Zelda's case was being discussed by the Isaacs family, Griplock, Gaston Larue and Signor Spezzi being also present, the private secretary was observed to manifest unusual emotion.

"As I understand it," said he, appearing to control himself with a great effort, "it will only require the presence of your adoptive mother, Madame Celeste Planchez, to fully identify you as the true Genevieve de Villemessant?"

He was looking rather unsteadily at Zelda as he spoke.

"We all think so," said the young girl. "But how did you know that my adoptive mother's name was Celeste? It is not mentioned in any of the documents that you have heard read."

"Still, was not Celeste her Christian name?"

"It was. How, Gaston, could you have known it?"

There was a rush of color in the secretary's dark cheek, a moist sparkling of the eye, an apparent struggle in the overlaboring breast.

Then he threw himself or rather she threw herself, at the young girl's feet.

"Because I am Celeste!" was the broken response. "Ah, no one has ever suspected my secret; but I, my little Genevieve, am none other than Celeste Planchez, your foster-mother!"

Zelda drew back in amazement, and then, appearing to realize it, drew the disguised woman to her feet, and they were weeping in each other's arms.

As a matter of course, every one else was scarcely less astonished.

"I am the living witness to be called up in your behalf, my darling," sobbed the dead-alive. "Moreover, there are other documents than those in your possession, documents that were intrusted solely to me, by your unfortunate father, Jean-Marie de Villemessant. These, together with my testimony, are all that the law will require. You shall soon take your true place in the world as Mademoiselle Genevieve de Villemessant, rich, honored and powerful."

A mist of joy came over the young girl.

"Strange enough transformation for a poor circus-rider!" she murmured. "But for one, at least, I shall evermore remain as simply Zelda. And, with a loving look, she placed her hand in Griplock's. "And you, Mamma Planchez, shall tell me how I came by such a pretty name as that, for I can remember no other."

"It is easily told," said Madame Planchez. "In giving you to my care, your dying father told me that it had been your beautiful Greek mother's name. Planchez and I, we did not steal you from your home, as perhaps Mr. Vanderpoer was given to understand."

"No. My husband was a bad man, a gambler and adventurer, and I had followed his desperate fortunes, which had at last brought him to Cayenne. There we made the acquaintance of your poor father. He had arrived thither a year previous, his beautiful wife, your mother, was newly dead, and you were but a baby in a native nurse's arms."

"Your father's life in France had been one of many follies and indiscretions, perhaps of something worse. His family had cast him off, and he was in the strange land under an assumed name. But before dying he gave you to Planchez and me, though it was to me alone that he intrusted the secret of your name and family, with perhaps the remote idea that it might one day be of service to you."

"We carried you to Algiers with us, and from that time on our affairs grew from bad to worse. My husband's associations were such as to cause me horror and fear. It was after he was mortally wounded that I conceived the idea of giving you to Mr. Vanderpoer, who had loved you from the first. It cost me a bitter pang, but the sacrifice was made, and we were separated."

"But I could not endure the loss of you. I knew you had been carried to Antwerp. On Planchez's death I followed thither in masculine attire, assuming the name of a brother who had died, and became the private secretary. It was something to be still near you and to watch over you."

The strange narrative closed with a fresh fit of weeping, and Celeste Planchez and her foster-child again mingled their tears in each other's arms.

Such was the disguised woman's strange narrative.

It was subsequently amplified, but enough has been given to clear up the long mystery in which she had figured.

That same day a message came to the detective from John Vincent, otherwise Centerpole Jack.

Nesta's injuries had taken a turn for the worse, and if he would see her once more alive he must hasten to her bedside.

Griplock lost no time in obeying the call.

He was gone three days.

What passed between him and the dying Gypsy princess shall remain sacred to the secrecy of a strange devotion and an unhappy love.

But when he returned to Zelda it was with a sad seriousness that seemed to have made a deep impression in his nature, and Nesta had carried her faults, her passion and her generosity into the great Beyond.

A few days after this it became known that Conrad Leomeister had committed suicide in his prison-cell.

He left a written confession of his complicity in the murder of Mr. Vanderpoer.

This confession made out Gogo to have been the actual perpetrator of the bloody deed.

Its statements were confirmed by those of Kalulah, which had been taken down in writing before the loss of her reason, which had occurred on the third day after the shock she had undergone in witnessing her brother's tragic death.

A singular mystery still surrounds this woman, who remains alive in a lunatic asylum to this day.

It is only known that brother and sister were Malays, whom Leomeister had first discovered as children in the interior of Dutch Sumatra.

Their characteristics were so remarkable that he had educated them to the professions which they had afterward pursued under the direction of various showmen, while perhaps also cultivating their inborn viciousness to the full.

The case of Gogo, especially, viewed as a simple monstrosity, was a most wonderful one; and, apart from the danger that was in him, it is perhaps a pity that he might not have lived.

The study of such a being would have been a boon for psychologists.

Griplock Crimmins accompanied Zelda, as we shall still call her, and Celeste Planchez to France at an early day.

They were also accompanied by a learned lawyer, familiar with the peculiarities of French jurisdiction, who had become deeply interested in the young woman's claims, and likewise carried with them the indorsement of the French consul at New York, who had made an examination of the documentary evidence at hand.

There was a long judicial investigation, but it ended in a triumph for the fair claimant, and she at last received the recognition of the world.

As a matter of course, Zelda's beauty, success and romantic history made an immense sensation in the gay capital of the fashionable world. She was the star of the season, the beauty of the day, the bright meteor of the throbbing hour.

Titled and wealthy and handsome suitors were not wanting for her hand, and the waif of destiny, the shuttlecock of fortune, the nameless circus-rider, became, as if at the stroke of a magician's wand, one of the most petted and desirable 'catches' in all Europe.

But petting could not pamper, nor fortune spoil, in this case, and where her heart was there was her hand.

It was at the height of her social success that Griplock, who had been absent from the throng of her courtiers for several days, and had about made up his mind that his love-dream was a fool's paradise now about to vanish in the air, came to her with extended hand, a forced smile on his lips, a farewell in his eyes.

"You have the world at your feet, and I trust you will enjoy your dominion," said he, with assumed cheerfulness. "I leave by the next steamer."

"You leave?"

"Yes."

"But where are you going?"

"To America—to my native land. Where else?"

"But what is to become of me?"

"Why, France is your native land. You will remain here."

"Indeed, I shall not."

"Ah! then the world is before you where to choose. With your youth, your beauty, your high birth, your riches, your brilliant offers, your—"

"Griplock!"

"What is it, mademoiselle?"

"Have you ceased to love me?"

"Great God! I? But what would you have? Zelda, it would be simple madness to throw yourself away on a rude, rough man like me! The world, the society in which you move—"

She interrupted him afresh by throwing herself on his breast in a passion of joyous tears.

"Have you forgotten that I love you?" she sobbed. "Do you deem my nature changed, that you speak to me thus?"

"Zelda, my queen, my ownest own! No, I forget nothing; but this is madness."

"Ah, yes! love is but a madness—we all know that. But what were the world, and what were the world's women without it?"

"But listen to me, dearest. It will be like throwing your life away. I am not worth such a sacrifice!"

She stopped the words with kisses.

"Tell me that you love me," she murmured.

"I do tell you so. I could keep on telling you that forever. Love you? I worship you! But Zelda, I am at the same time a reasonable being—and one many years your senior. I would not have you make yourself what might prove an everlasting regret."

"Regret?"

"Yes."

"In giving myself to you?"

"Yes."

"Welcome regret then, in so sweet a shape, only let us call it by its real name, which is love. As I have never been really Zelda, but only Genevieve in truth, so shall that which you deem regret be nevermore, but only love!"

"Adorable girl!"

"I love you."

He resisted his joyous fate no longer.

It was not by the next steamer, but by the next one after that, that they returned to America, and then it was as bridegroom and as bride.

Their quiet wedding at the house of the American Minister was a bitter disappointment for the world of Paris, but they cared little for this, love having opened to them such rosy and dreamy vistas as to cast aught else into shadow by the contrast.

Mamma Planchez, as Zelda lovingly called her now, accompanied them, and it was arranged that she should not be again separated from the foster-darling of her heart.

They had sojourned in France for nearly a year, and many pleasant surprises, chiefly in the show business, were awaiting them in America.

The Universal Circus, Menagerie and Roman Hippodrome was still on the road, under flattering auspices, but under a new partnership, as well.

Signor Mauritius Spezzi was the new partner, and Kitty Isaacs had become the signor's happy wife.

Needless to add, perhaps, that the worthy signor's ring-mastering, clowning and mer-manning days were at an end, or that he had found in domestic bliss with the girl of his heart the gratification and happiness for which he had so long and humbly prayed.

One of the newer features of the show was a certain St. Jago de Castilliano, a gigantic pseudo Spanish athlete, whose prodigious feats of strength in the sawdust arena were rapidly becoming famous.

This wonder was none other than our old friend, Black Jago, and his good wife, formerly Mildred Isaacs, is so proud of his achievements, so happy in his love, that her whilom folly has long been forgiven her, if not wholly forgotten.

Nesta sleeps in her wildwood grave, and her wandering band, with her brother as its leader, has disappeared, none know whither.

They, the Gypsies, are the strange interloping nomads of the nations, coming none know whence, a moonlight race, flitting here and there like forest-shadows among the peopled ways, of more mystery than honesty, and perhaps of little general account.

But one at least of their wild number has left a sweet and a sad impression in the heart of Griplock Crimmins, the erstwhile Circus Detective, which shall beat not the less true for the beautiful being that is its living queen, in that there is still an occasional haunting hour for the passionate Gypsy star that burnt itself out against the black curtain of the dividing line.

THE END.

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